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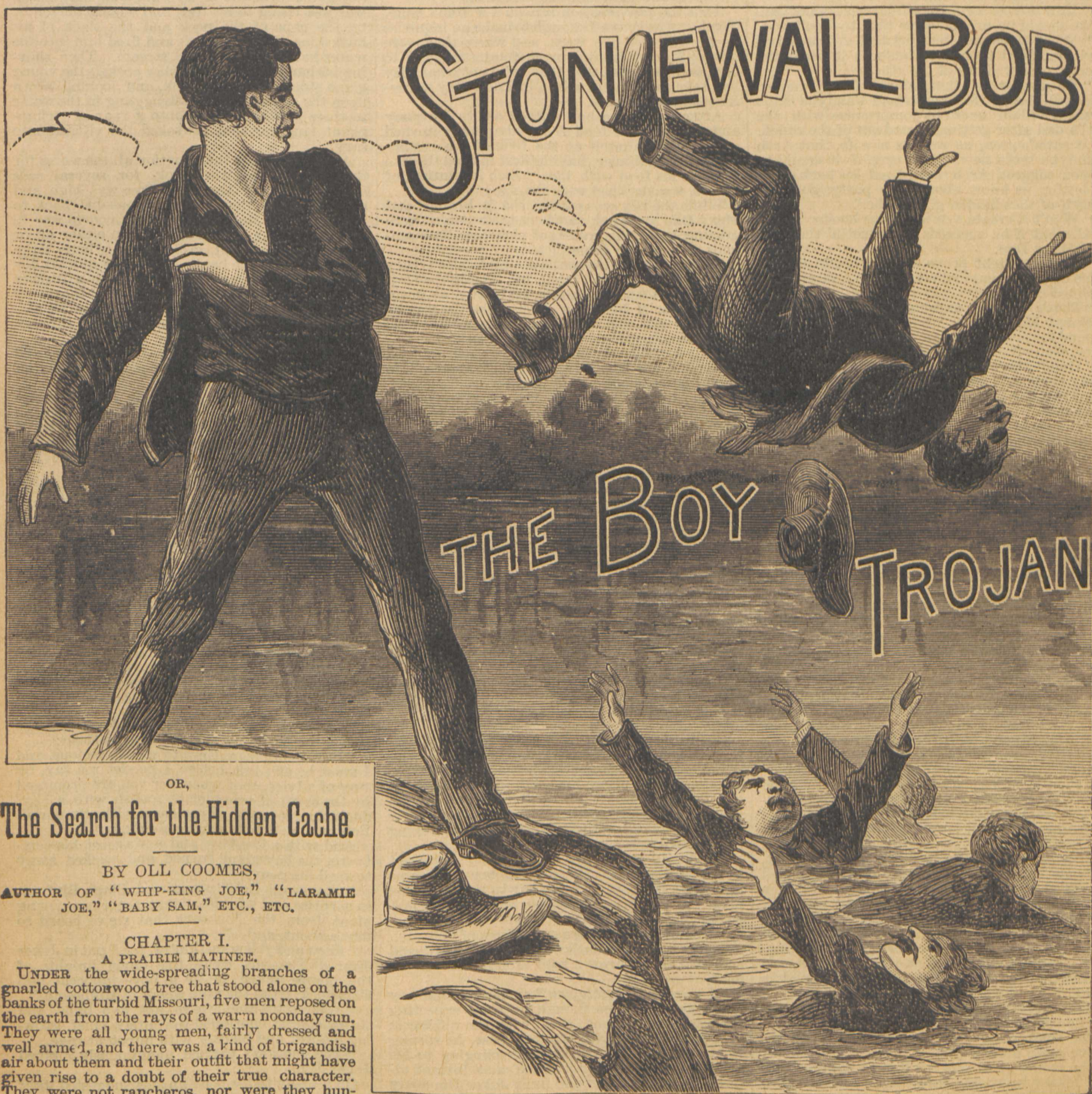
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OR,

The Search for the Hidden Cache.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "WHIP-KING JOE," "LARAMIE
JOE," "BABY SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PRAIRIE MATINEE.

UNDER the wide-spreading branches of a gnarled cottonwood tree that stood alone on the banks of the turbid Missouri, five men reposed on the earth from the rays of a warm noonday sun. They were all young men, fairly dressed and well armed, and there was a kind of brigandish air about them and their outfit that might have given rise to a doubt of their true character. They were not rancheros, nor were they hunters. Their well-caparisoned horses, grazing near with the bits in their mouths, suggested the

SEIZING THE FELLOW BY THE NAPE OF THE NECK AND THE SLACK OF HIS BUCKSKINS, HE
LIFTED HIM ALOFT AND FIRED HIM INTO THE WATER HALF-WAY ACROSS THE STREAM.

possibility of their being free rangers. But they were not—they were outlaws—freebooters of the great Dakota range, lying there in wait for what?—for whom? Surely not an enemy, for their weapons were lying scattered about in a careless way.

The name of Black Bluford, the Prairie Bandit, was associated with many a black deed of robbery and murder, but one not knowing him would never have taken him for the villain that he really was. He was a man of five-and-thirty and of rather a striking and prepossessing appearance. He had long, dark hair and a heavy black mustache. His complexion was as swarthy as an Indian's and his gray eyes keen and penetrating.

The appearance of Black Bluford's followers was more in keeping with their true character. While they were young men, their very countenances were stamped with crime and wickedness.

The party had halted there by the "Lone Tree" to rest and graze their horses. They were provided with food, of which they partook, finishing up with a flask of brandy.

After their dinner had been dispatched, the outlaw chief stretched himself out upon the grass, saying as he did so:

"Now it does seem to me that our friend Vandyke should be around some time to-day."

"What if he and the girl had compromised and concluded to go into business in the settlement?" observed one of the others.

"No danger of that, Mexy Dan," replied Black Bluford, "for our friend Vandyke is too great a villain ever to compromise with the girl's dad after getting booted out of the ranch. It is satisfaction, as well as a wife, that Arch Vandyke seeks now. And even if it should be as you suggest, Arch would not go back on us in letting us know about that party going in search of that hidden gold-cache."

"Won't it create a tumultuous hoodoo in the settlement if he succeeds in abductin' the gal?" said Mexy Dan.

"And it might prove darned hoodooish for some of us gay gamboliers," added a facetiously inclined character.

"That's what I expected from Joker Jim," declared Mexy Dan; "he's eternally explorin' around for possible danger to himself. His bump of caution—"

"Hello! there comes a horseman now!" suddenly exclaimed Black Bluford; "but it can't be Vandyke, for he's comin' from the wrong direction."

"No," said Joker Jim, "that's not Van, but I should say that it was a Manitobian giant mounted on a Shetland pony."

"Jews and Gentiles!" exclaimed Mexy, "isn't he a 'ellhopper though—a reg'ler old Goliath tall?"

"Bless my liver!" exclaimed another, "I never seen such a royal big rooster—bigger'n the hoss he rides, or I'll eat it. Who can it be, boys?"

"Rather—what can it be?" added Black Bluford.

Thus the freebooters conversed as the horseman approached, and their surprise and curiosity were none the less satisfied when he at length drew rein within the shadow of the ancient cottonwood.

In size the horseman was a man of giant proportions, although his smooth, beardless face and ruddy complexion told that he was a boy of not over twenty years of age. He was fully six feet in height, and built from the ground up like an athlete. He was clad in a mixed suit of buckskin and gray cotton cloth that fitted him closely and showed off his splendid form to good advantage. He was broad-shouldered and deep-chested. The collar of his blue-flannel shirt lay open, revealing his stout, muscular neck and breast. His big, brown ox-eyes looked out from under their long lashes with a pleasant, innocent light, and his large, yet expressive mouth, seemed wreathed in a smile that was indicative of a kind-hearted and rollicking big boy.

At his back the young giant carried a Spencer carbine, and to a broad belt that encircled his waist hung a pair of revolvers and a hunting-knife. His mustang was well caparisoned, and in addition to the coiled lariat he carried in front, hung at the saddle-bow, he carried a roll of blankets and other articles strapped to the saddle behind him.

The freebooters rose to their feet when the youth came up.

The young giant was the first to speak. Doffing his sombrero and throwing it over the horn of his saddle, he exclaimed:

"Hullo! what've I struck? Pilgrims or pirates?"

"Pilgrims of the prairie, of course," replied Black Bluford, in a social, pleasant voice.

"Room for another small fellow, I reckon, here under the shade of this ancient tree," the young giant observed, as he dismounted and slipped the bits from his pony's mouth and turned it out to graze.

"Oh, plenty room here," replied the outlaw chief, "but in your case I don't see where the small fellow comes in; nor do I remember of ever having seen or heard of a giant on this range before. Stranger, you're an 'ellhopper for the boy I take you to be."

"I wasn't stunted in my youth, I'll admit, stranger," the boy responded, a smile lighting his face.

"And what's your name, and where do you hail from?"

"My name's Robert Comstock, and I hail from the pine woods of Minnesota," was the answer.

"And which way are you going, Robert?"

"West, to grow up with the country," was the boy's reply.

"Slaughter Injuns and outlaws, I reckon?"

"I'm not going for my health, stranger, that you can be sure of," replied the boy, with a smile. "I don't know what I will do yet—anything that offers from herdin' bulls to drivin' stage."

Thus the conversation ran on for some time. The boy was shrewd enough to make no inquiries as to who the five were, and where they were going; for, while they were total strangers to him, he mistrusted that they were not what they had taken some pains to let him know they were—*independent rangers*.

After awhile the boy walked out to his pony and taking some food from his pack returned and seating himself at the foot of the cottonwood ate his dinner, having first invited the five to share his food with him, which invitation, of course, was declined with thanks.

While the boy was eating, Black Bluford and Mexy Dan went out to where their ponies were grazing, under the pretext of picketing their animals on a fresher grass-plot.

"Mexy," said the outlaw chief, when they were out of hearing, "that big land-lubber is a little older than he appears, and fully as large as he looks. I don't just exactly like the way he talks and acts, and his presence here at this time bodes us no good."

"He don't surely know who we are or he'd never stopped here," replied Mexy Dan. "He don't know enough to ask who we are."

"Ay, but his apparent ignorance may be a shrewd, bold game to disarm us of suspicion," declared Black Bluford.

"Well, we needn't take no chances," replied Mexy. "We can easily git rid of him. I don't think he's anything but a big, overgrown, chuckle-headed boy, and believe we can squeeze all the information we want out of him easy as squeezin' the juice out of a lemon. A rope around his neck and over a limb of that cottonwood would p'raps unlock all the secrets of his breast, if he has any."

"Mexy Dan, you are as fertile-brained as a born liar," said Black Bluford, "and I guess your rope-trick will be the very thing as a persuader. You get the other boys aside and let them into the secret and make your arrangements to jump him. But look out; he may give you trouble—a lively tussle."

"Tussle nothin'!" retorted Mexy, "he's a big, soft, lubberly boy, of a mushroom growth and with a flabby muscle—an overgrown buffalo-bull calf."

Black Bluford went back to the shade and lazily stretched himself on the ground near the young giant, who sat leaning against the tree-trunk, his arm resting above his head. He engaged the boy in conversation about the country north, while Mexy and the others, who had been beckoned aside, were maturing their plans for taking the youth a prisoner.

Finally all was settled and the four returned to the cottonwood. Mexy and Joker Jim came up behind the boy, and like hawks they pounced upon the youth, each seizing him by an arm—one of them exclaiming:

"Young hoss, you are our prisoner!"

One of the other outlaws sprung forward and endeavored to throw a rope around the youth's neck.

"I guess not, gentlemen," exclaimed the boy giant, as quickly as though he were expecting some such movement; then, with the quickness of a panther and with apparent ease, he sprang to his feet with the two outlaws clinging to his arms like monkeys, and, at the same instant almost he spun around and flung Joker Jim away from him with such force as to send the outlaw flying headlong over the high bank into the turbid river. And then with as much ease, apparently,

as one would fling aside a rat, he dashed Mexy Dan against the tree with such force as to lay that deluded villain stunned and bleeding on the earth.

The other three outlaws quickly saw that the young man was a Hercules in strength as well as a giant in stature, and at once rushed to the assistance of their friends.

With a grim smile on his face and a determined look in his big brown eyes, Robert Comstock drove his clinched fist into a third man's face, knocking him back against Black Bluford with such terrific force as to lay both prostrate upon the earth. The fifth outlaw he dealt a dextrous left-hander under the chin that lifted the villain off his feet and sent him over the bank into the river with the howling, cursing Joker Jim.

Quickly recovering himself Black Bluford was reaching for his revolver that lay near where he had fallen, but young Comstock saw his movement, and bounding forward he seized the villain by the ankle and with but little effort sent the howling scamp sprawling into the river. Then a kick of the boy's big foot sent the fourth man after his leader into the murmuring Missouri; and to still make his work complete, the boy giant turned to Mexy Dan, who, half-dazed, was just rising to his feet, and seizing the fellow by the nape of the neck and the slack of his buckskins lifted him aloft and fired him into the water half-way across the stream. Then shoving his hands into his breeches-pockets the young giant stood upon the bank, and looking down upon the discomfited five struggling in the water to their necks, he burst into a roar of triumphant laughter that provoked the villains into fury.

And what made the situation all the worse for the outlaws, the west bank, for several rods above and below the Lone Tree was high and projecting, making escape impossible back to where the boy stood. Their only course was to cross to the opposite shore and go either up or down the river and cross back where there was a break in the bank. This they quickly discovered and through fear of the boy's further vengeance—knowing they were now at the mercy of his revolvers if he felt disposed to use them—they struck out, swimming and wading through the muddy current.

Robert Comstock picked up their weapons and dropped them into the river, saying to himself as he did so:

"If I were only sure that my suspicions are correct—that they are outlaws, I'd send them all afloat by sockin' a bullet through every one of them. At any rate, be they outlaws or rangers, they'll not try any games with a lone boy again."

Black Bluford, who was the most expert swimmer of the five, was the first to reach the opposite shore, and, half-exhausted, he seated himself on the bank and shouting back to Mexy Dan, who was laboring slowly behind the others, said:

"Say, Mexy, what do you think now about that boy? He's not so much of a mushroom as you thought, is he? His muscle isn't as flabby as one'd think, is it? This is what I call a prairie matinee, boys—a real damper on some one. Brace up there, Mexy, and in the language of the poet, 'pull for the shore, sailor.'"

"Shut up—your in—fernal gab!" blowed Mexy, crawling out and sinking exhausted on the beach.

As soon as the five outlaws had reached the shore, the boy giant shouted over to them:

"Say, gentlemen, time to me is precious, and I must be off; but before I go, let me say, by way of advice, that whenever you are prompted by the spirit of mischief to foolish with a boy, don't forget your experience with Stonewall Bob, who now bids you good-day."

And with a low bow and a wave of his sombrero, the boy giant turned and walked away toward his pony.

"Stonewall Bob!" exclaimed Black Bluford, in surprise and disgust, "that notorious young giant from the Niobrara that we've heard so much about, and—"

"Seen and felt somethin' of, too," put in Joker Jim. "Yes, yes, we're five darin' knights of the plains—taken in by a boy—innocent Bob Comstock, from the pine woods o' Minnesota!"

"Who votes that we're not five blind and stupid asses?" continued the outlaw chief, growing blacker and blacker with impotent rage.

"The motion's carried unanimously," piped Joker Jim.

On his way to his pony an idea suggested itself to Robert Comstock, and taking out his knife he cut the girths of the outlaws' saddles and the reins of their bridles. Then mounting his ani-

mal he rode away, a grim smile of triumph on his boyish face.

And half an hour later, when the five freebooters of the prairie had regained the west shore of the river, they saw Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan, a mere speck in the distance, ambling away toward the west.

CHAPTER II.

A MOAN OF DISTRESS.

THE big round moon seemed to stand still in the valley of the Grand River, as once it had stood in Ajalon's vale, flooding the plains of Dakota with a weird and mellow radiance.

A soft breeze drifting up from the south, carried to the ears of a grim gray wolf that came loping over the plain from his haunts among the hills, a strange sound that caused the animal to stop, prick up his sharp ears and listen.

A night-bird skimming along the plain flapped his wings above the wolf and uttered an impish cry as if in defiance to its grizzled, hungry foe of the night.

The wolf snapped at the bird, licked his chops and squatted upon his haunches.

A fresh, strong breeze came sweeping across the valley, trailing out a faint sound like a moan of human agony.

Quickly the sly old wolf rose from his haunches, thrust out his sharp nose and trotted off across the valley, sniffing the ground as he went along. He had not gone far when he stopped again, raised his nose and sniffed the air, turning his head from side to side, then suddenly bounding away, going squarely up the wind. For more than a mile the animal loped along in this way, but when that strange sound again smote its acute ears, it again stopped, and squatting on its haunches, raised its nose in the air and gave utterance to several sharp, snappish yelps, the last of which was prolonged into a long, gibberish howl.

It was immediately answered from over the plain by others of its kind. Again and again it sent forth that same dismal howl, and again and again it was answered.

Finally it was joined by a second wolf, and these two howled together, and others came and joined them, and in the course of an hour a score of the animals had congregated, and they seemed to hold a council that lasted until that moan of distress was again trailed across the valley, when they began to scatter out and form a circle on the plain, then gradually advance toward a common center, all the while keeping up a demoniac howl.

In the grass—in the center of that circle of wolves—lay a human being in dreadful agony. The beasts could not see him, yet they heard his moans of pain, and these, with the scent of blood, seemed to aggravate their hunger. But with their characteristic caution and cowardice the scavengers of the plain continued to advance slowly, yet noisily, toward that common center where, prone upon the earth—the moon shining in his upturned, blood-stained face—lay a man pinioned to the plain. His arms and legs were extended, and his feet and hands lashed to posts driven deep into the earth. A rope had been put around his neck and then crossed, and its ends secured to the same posts to which his hands were tied in such a manner that any attempt to raise his head would be to tighten the rope.

Who was this unfortunate man? and by whose ruthless hands had he been bound there in the solitude of that desolate valley, a living prey to the ravenous wolves? It could not have been the work of savages, for savages would never have left him, dead or alive, unscalped.

But what difference is it to these hungry wolves whether the man is prince or beggar, hunter or outlaw? To their ever hungry maw the festering carcass of a buffalo, or a hot, quivering flash of a living victim, is the same.

The helpless man heard the beasts gathering around him, but not until one of them came so close that he could feel its hot, fetid breath on his face, did he see its shaggy form that seemed to tower above him against the sky like a great hairy monster.

A cry for help issued from the man's lips. The wolves, frightened by his voice, fell back a few paces, snapping and snarling at each other, but they soon rallied and again pressed forward.

Again and again the man shouted for help. But where upon that great plain was an ear, save that of the Almighty, to respond to this appeal?

Nothing but the yelping of the wolves answered him. He tugged and tore at his fetters, but in vain. He shouted, he prayed, he cursed. He seemed upon the verge of madness. His face became rigid and ghastly. His eyes glared out from their sockets like those of a dying beast.

He writhed his body like a wounded serpent. His breath came quick and hard. The veins in his neck and face seemed ready to burst.

Closer and closer drew the circle of wolves. Every moment the wretched man expected to feel their sharp teeth tearing into his flesh. Hope was dying in his breast and his brain seemed to grow dizzy when, mingled with the snarl of the beasts, he heard a new sound that he took for the throbbing of his own heart; but suddenly he saw the wolves fall back and then vanish from sight, while the clatter of hooved feet breaking upon the man's ears dispelled the sound of wolfish orgies from his hearing. The next moment a wild, terrified voice—the voice of a woman, fell upon his ears, and before he could fully realize the truth of the sudden change in the situation, a panting horse was reined in almost over him, and the lithe figure of a woman leaping from the animal's back, fell upon her knees at his side.

She was a young woman of not over seventeen summers, with a lithe figure and a face that was beautiful despite the look of fear and distress it wore. Her long brown hair fell in a disordered mass about her shoulders from her uncovered head.

Dropping upon the breast of the prostrate man, her white lips parted, and she cried out:

"Oh, my dear father! are you alive? Speak to me, father!"

"Mabel, my child, am I dreaming? Is it you, Mabel?" responded the man, like one half delirious.

"Yes, father," replied the maiden, between her sobs; "I escaped from those human demons, but they are coming in pursuit. Oh, heavens! what shall I do?"

"Untie my bonds, child—quick!" the father exclaimed.

The maiden sprung to one of the posts and attempted to untie the rope, but the knots defied her feeble strength. She seized hold of the post and endeavored to draw it from the ground, but it stubbornly refused to yield.

"Oh, father! God help us! I cannot release you!"

"Let me try it a clatter," said a voice behind her, and turning, the startled girl beheld a strange man standing at her side.

He was an old man, dressed in the garb of a hunter, and armed with a rifle, pistol and knife, and at sight of him a thrill of joy shot through the maiden's breast, for in his kind voice and his rough yet honest face she recognized a friend.

Without a moment's hesitation after he spoke, the old man drew his knife, and stooping, cut the bonds that held his unfortunate fellow-being prone upon the earth, saying, in the unmistakable vernacular of the border, as he did so:

"Stranger, you're pinned down here pretty solid, ar'n't ye? Somebody's been tryin' to ornament the landscape with you, haven't they? There now, rise up and tell a fellow who you be, and who staked you out here."

"God bless you, stranger!" exclaimed the man, as he with some effort raised his numb body to a sitting posture; "you have saved my life. My name is Joshua Thurston, and I was bound here, and left to be devoured alive, by a band of devils led by Black Bluford, the outlaw. This is my child!"

"Oh, kind stranger! I thank you with all my heart!" cried Mabel, falling upon her knees and kissing the old man's hand.

"You be entirely welcome, little gal," replied the old hunter; "but goodness gracious sakes, don't waste any more kisses on that old hand. Kisses ar'n't made to be squandered on a feller's paw, don't ye know, little one? But what's that comin' yander?"

"The outlaws! the demons that bound me here and fled with my child, who, escaping from them, is being pursued!" said Mr. Thurston, in great excitement.

"How many o' them be they?" asked the old borderman.

"Six," answered Mabel.

"Six—only six?" replied the old man, cocking his rifle and dropping upon one knee, "that's just Old Zadok's number for a square leetle fight."

"Sir, are you really Old Zadok, the hunter?" exclaimed Mr. Thurston, eagerly.

"I be that very old Mosaic temple," was the hunter's reply; "but here, Mr. Thurston, take one o' my revolvers and help me chug a few o' them varmints if they charge us."

Zadok kept his eye upon the approaching horsemen, and when they were about a hundred yards away he raised his rifle and taking steady aim, fired upon them.

A cry of surprise came to the ears of the trio

from the lips of the outlaws, and this was soon followed by curses of rage, for Zadok's shot had taken effect and the horse of the foremost outlaw had been killed, and its rider thrown so violently upon the ground as to partially stun him.

So greatly were the freebooters taken by surprise that they were almost thrown into confusion. They reined in their horses and two of them dismounted to assist their fallen friend, forgetting that they had stopped within range of the unknown's deadly rifle until another shot had tumbled one of them out of his saddle, dead.

Then the outlaws returned the fire with their revolvers, their bullets whistling in dangerous proximity overhead and around them. One of them finally struck the horse upon which Mabel had escaped, causing the animal to break away and flee over the plain.

This was a serious loss to Mabel, and greatly enhanced the dangers of their situation. Hearing the maiden lamenting her loss, Old Zadok turned to her and said:

"Don't worry one smidgeon, little gal, for I've a hoss over here by the 'Sentinel' that's good as ever thumped Dakota soil, and he's at your service."

"Oh, you are very, very kind, sir, said Mabel; 'but Zadok, see, those outlaws are hurrying away toward the river; what do you suppose they mean?'"

"Gal," said the hunter in a changed voice, rising to his feet, "do you hear a strange noise up ther valley?"

There was a moment's silence.

A low rumbling sound not unlike the roll of distant thunder came to the ears of the listeners. Mabel glanced up at the sky. Not a cloud was to be seen on all the starry dome of heaven.

"I do not understand it," said Mabel, turning her fair white face toward the hunter with an inquiring look in her eyes.

"It's a new danger," said the old borderer, "and we must elude it or in half an hour we'll be ground into dust. It are a herd of buffaloes a billion strong. I sighted the herd just before sunset from an eminence on the plain, and I calkerlated to swat a few o' them in the mornin'. They've been stampeded either by Ingins or white hunters that are havin' a moonlight hunt. But come, let's make for the Sentinel over here whar my hoss is."

The old man led the way across the valley, Mr. Thurston and his daughter following.

Over beyond a little swell in the valley some eighty rods distant they came to where a horse was lariatd out to grass with a bridle and saddle upon it. And hard by was a great bowlder—the only one that was to be found in fifty miles of there. It was a landmark on the plains of Dakota, and known among the white hunters as the Sentinel. It was a point of convergence and divergence for white men and red crossing the plain. It was a favorite rallying-point for the Indian hunters.

The Sentinel resembled a monster egg lying upon its side half-buried in the earth. From the small end pointing eastward it sloped upward to a height of eight feet. There was not a flat spot upon its surface. It was round and sloping, and the hand of time had polished it off almost as smooth as glass.

"Thar, folks," said Old Zadok, "are my hoss, Shuttle, and thar are the Sentinel. One o' us three'll have to mount the hoss and flee from the path o' the buffaloes, and the t'other two climb onto the Sentinel's hump. It will not hold more than two."

"Father," said Mabel, "you mount the horse and flee, and I will remain with the hunter."

"I am ready to accept my share of the danger. I would not—"

"Friend," said Old Zadok, interrupting Thurston, "don't waste words—moments are precious. You are not aware of the danger that's comin'. Mount Shuttle and fly. Go in this direction and go like the devil war arter you, and you'll clear the track o' the beasts. Trust yer gal with me, and I'll bring her through safe. Join us here after the herd has passed."

Joshua Thurston mounted the horse reluctantly. He seemed to have a presentiment that something dreadful was to happen, and having kissed his child and bid Old Zadok good-by, he dashed away at the top of the animal's speed.

Mabel bore up bravely under the parting from her father and in the face of the coming danger, and Old Zadok, who was astonished at her wonderful courage and presence of mind, said, in hopes of still strengthening her courage for the ordeal to come:

"Gal, you are a brave little soul, and I hope you'll be nerry till the danger is past. It's a slippery hold on that rock, and if we slip off while the buffaloes are passin' it'll be sure death."

Your father was weak and nervous, or I wouldn't have sent him away from you, but gone myself. It are more dangerous to stay here than to go as he did, but as we couldn't all ride I thought it best that you and I stay. Now let me help you up onto the rock."

Taking her by the hand, they began to ascend the slanting rock, the maiden going ahead. Zadok's moccasins being damp with dew from the grass, they adhered to the rock's smooth surface, and enabled him to maintain a firm footing. As the old fellow seated the girl on the rounded summit of the bowlder, he said:

"God didn't drap this rock here for nothin', did he, gal? But now I'll slip back and git my things."

"Do hurry, Zadok," begged the maiden, eagerly, anxiously, for the sound of the approaching avalanche was now rolling so near that the Sentinel seemed to tremble beneath her.

Zadok sprang to the ground, and procuring his rifle and blanket, started to re-ascend the rock. He had taken but a single step when he was startled by the cry from Mabel's lips:

"Look, Zadok! there are Indians!"

The hunter turned so quickly that he slipped from the rock to the ground, but he landed upon his feet, and was ready to meet the new danger that threatened him and his fair charge. He drew his revolver, but the savages were at his side before he could use it. One of the red-skins sprang upon the rock and began crawling up toward Mabel, while the other drawing his knife, stopped to engage the hunter, for full well the Indian knew that the Sentinel would not shelter four of them, and one of that four an old-time enemy.

Old Zadok, although his life was in imminent peril, was more considerate of Mabel's welfare than his own, and when his revolver cracked, the red-skin on the rock, who had by a single leap almost reached the maiden, and was then endeavoring to push her off, that he might save himself, rolled to the ground, shot through the heart. Mabel thus saved, the old man endeavored to shoot his own savage, but the latter seized his wrist and prevented him from using his revolver, and the next moment the two went down in a hand-to-hand struggle.

"Oh, may Heaven help him!" cried Mabel, clasping her hands over her breast in an agony of suspense, and gazing first at the combatants and then back at the myriads of buffaloes rolling down from the north like the black waves of an angry sea.

CHAPTER III.

A LIVING WHIRLPOOL.

To and fro Old Zadok and the red-skin whirled in rapid evolutions about the base of the Sentinel, in mortal combat. Mabel watched them in breathless suspense. She could hear their labored breathing, their blows and occasionally an involuntary gasp of agony.

To the poor girl the moments seemed like hours. Her heart almost ceased to beat, and between her anxiety for Zadok's triumph and her fears of the on-rushing buffaloes, it seemed the suspense would drive her mad. The earth now fairly trembled beneath the near approach of that million of hoofs, and the roar of an advancing cyclone was not more terrible.

Unable to maintain her silence longer, the maiden finally cried out:

"Zadok! oh, Zadok! the buffaloes are almost here!"

The old hunter and his antagonist lay almost still at the lower end of the Sentinel, but at the sound of the maiden's voice Zadok raised his head and gazed around him in a dazed sort of a way. Then he raised himself and began crawling up the sloping rock. His movements were slow and feeble. He spoke never a word. Mabel watched him a moment, her heart growing sick with horror when she saw the blood pouring from a wound in his breast and fairly drenching the back of the rock.

"Zadok!" she cried, "you are wounded! Oh, my brave old friend! let me help you!"

Zadok raised his hand and motioned her back, at the same time shaking his head.

The next instant a black form shot close by the Sentinel, its head lowered, its eyes glowing like fire-balls—the hot breath pouring from its nostrils and clouds of dust bursting from beneath its hoofs. And close behind this mad beast came others, and then a solid mass of moving forms—a black, surging, seething sea of buffaloes that reached out on either side and back beyond the range of vision. The dust rising in the air cast a dull haze over the sky, and this dust-fog and the warm, fetid breath of the

mad beasts made the air almost stifling and suffocating.

Like a mighty torrent the buffaloes parted on either side of the Sentinel, though they were crowded so close against it that their white horns rattled and raked its sides. A huge bull, swept on by the irresistible tide, and unable to turn aside, struck his great head full against the upper end of the rock. So terrific was the blow that the animal would have turned clear over the obstruction had it been a foot or two lower. As it was, it seemed to stand for a moment on its head against the rock, its tail lashing the terrified Mabel across the shoulders. Then it fell outward, half-stunned. Another buffalo stumbled over it, and another over that, and so on, until the order, as it were, of the stampede seemed broken, and the Sentinel became the center of a living whirlpool from the depths of which came the sound of rattling hoofs, crashing horns, angry bellows and snorts of pain.

The blockade swiftly extended backward and around the Sentinel. Hundreds of the terrified beasts became piled in one promiscuous mass, in which they leaped, and plunged, and walked over each other—trampling and goring to death the weaker ones.

To all this terrible scene going on around him Old Zadok paid no attention. He stood upon his hands and knees, his face bent downward, his body slightly swaying to and fro, while little rivulets of blood from the wounds in his breast ran down the white sides of the rock.

"Zadok!" Mabel finally shrieked above the awful roar of that living whirlpool of maddened beasts, "Zadok, you are wounded!—you are bleeding to death!"

"Yes, yes, gal," the old man replied, and the words seemed to cause him a pang of agony, for he sprang to his feet uttering a cry of terrible pain.

Then he threw up his hands and clutched at space as if for support, and reeling to and fro his face contorted with pain, he suddenly made a convulsive leap from off the rock and falling across the head and neck of a passing buffalo, was swept away from the maiden's sight like a feather swept out to sea on the receding tide.

CHAPTER IV.

A GALLANT FRIEND.

ALONE now upon the Sentinel, her heart sick with terror and her brain growing dizzy, Mabel Thurston sat watching the mad torrent of buffaloes rushing by. It was an appalling situation to the poor girl, and as she reflected upon the possibility of her father's death—knowing full well that Old Zadok had gone down to a terrible fate—and that she was alone upon that desolate valley, a strange feeling came stealing over her, and the rock upon which she sat seemed sinking down, down into the trembling earth—it seemed she was about being engulfed in the depths of a black sea whose thunderous waves were rolling about her feet. Her strength, her courage, her senses were giving way, and she was fast sinking into a state of unconsciousness when the last of the herd of buffaloes swept by and the crack of rifles and the shout of human voices reaching her ears roused her from her stupor—the lethargy of terror. She started up like one from a troubled dream. She gazed around her. She saw the rear of the mighty herd dissolving in the shadows of the distance. She heard the crack, crack of fire-arms almost continuously in the direction of the buffaloes, and then she knew that they were being pursued by hunters. Her first impulse was to cry out for help, but it occurred to her that the hunters might be enemies—Indians, as Old Zadok had intimated, and she remained quiet.

But what should she do? She glanced around her. The fog of dust still hung in the air, somewhat obscuring the light of the moon. Not a vestige of the two dead savages could be seen about the rock. The sharp hoofs of the buffaloes had trampled them into dust. Round and about the rock lay several buffalo carcasses trampled into shapeless masses of flesh.

The maiden's mind reverted to her father. She wondered if he had escaped from the path of the mad herd, and involuntarily she turned her face toward the east.

Out of the distant shadows she saw a horseman coming. Her heart gave a great bound of joy, for she had no other thought than that it was her father. She clapped her hands in unbounded joy and shouted his name.

But the poor girl was doomed to bitter disappointment, for, as the rider approached, she saw it was a stranger—a large man, who appeared on the horse he rode like a giant of Brobdignag.

The horseman rode straight toward her, and again was her heart and mind put to the severest test between hope and fear.

The unknown rode up, reined in his mustang, and fixing his eyes on Mabel, uttered a low whistle, indicative of surprise.

"Rats and calamity!" finally burst from the fellow's lips, "what does this mean? a statue to beauty, or an actual, livin', movin' girl of flesh and blood!"

"Oh, sir!" Mabel found words to reply, "I hope you are a friend!"

"Salvation and calamity! woman—girl—angel!" exclaimed the stranger; "I'm a friend to everything and everybody in need of friends. I am Bob Comstock, or, as they have twisted my name around over on the Jim River, Stonewall Bob, because I'm bigger 'n' uglier 'n' a stone wall daubed with mud."

"And are you not called the Boy Trojan?" asked Mabel, her eyes beginning to glow with some of their wonted light.

"Yes, Boy Trojan, too; in fact, I'm all mixed up so on names that I'm almost a stranger to myself. But, no difference who I am, you have found a friend in me, Miss Stranger, and I will be only too happy to serve your wishes. May I ask your name?"

"Mabel Thurston," she replied, "my home is at Humboldt settlement, on the Cheyenne River."

"Away down there? and you here alone?" the boy giant exclaimed.

"I was left here alone."

"And were you here while that herd of buffaloes were passin'?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sin and calamity! Miss Mabel, I'm afraid you're not here of your own free will."

"No sir; I am here by the power of a villain."

"I'll bet some blue-bearded devil's at the bottom of it; but pardon my strong language, miss, and my interruption. What reason had the scamp for carrying you off up here?"

"I spurned his proffered love," Mabel went on with the utmost confidence in the gallant youth before her here; "I did so repeatedly, because I loathed him. I could not help it, but he continued his advances until my father was compelled to interfere, and one day he turned Archibald Vandyke from the house. Three months later I was riding alone on the prairie, away a mile or so from the settlement, when Vandyke and a confederate rode from concealment, and seizing my horse and me, and binding me in the saddle, carried me away by force. Where they were taking me I knew not, at first, but when they were joined this morning by the outlaw Black Bluford, and four of his followers, I made up my mind that I was being taken to the mountains, and—"

"Pardon me, Miss Thurston," again interrupted the young giant, "but what kind of a looking fellow was this Black Bluford?"

The maiden described the outlaw and his four men.

"Fiends and calamity!" burst from the Boy Trojan's lips, "I had that very gang at my mercy yesterday, and could have made cat-fish bait of all of them had I been sure they were outlaws. What a blind blunder! I mistrusted them, and yet— But go on, miss, and I'll try not to disturb you again."

"As I was saying, I felt satisfied," Mabel went on, "that the outlaws' destination was the hills, although about noon to-day I heard Black Bluford say they would reach camp above the Forks by midnight, and so I supposed they had a camp or rendezvous above the Grand River Forks. But just before sunset this evening, my father, who alone had been following our trail, came suddenly upon the party and attempted my rescue; but he was overpowered and made prisoner; and then by Vandyke's request he was stretched upon the plain and bound hand and foot to picket-pins driven into the earth, and there left to be devoured alive by wolves. A few miles further on—just before the moon came up—I managed to elude the villains and return to my father, who was still alive. A few moments after my arrival at my father's side, an old hunter came up and helped me to release him. His name was Zadok, and a kind and noble old man he was—"

"Yes, yes, I know Zadok," put in the Boy Trojan; "he's an odd old soul, but he's as noble as he's brave; but, miss, here I'm chirpin' in again. Go on with your story, and if I disturb you again you'll not be to blame for it."

Mabel went on and told of her father's release, the repulse of the outlaws, the flight to the Sentinel, the departure of her father, Zadok's fight with the savages, the old hunter's fate and her

own mental suffering up to the moment of his—Stonewall's—arrival.

The boy giant fairly groaned in spirit over the news of the terrible death of Old Zadok, and the maiden saw tears glistening in his big bright eyes.

"Poor old Zadok!" the youth said, dismounting and resting his arm on the saddle; "it was a hard way to die, but it was in a good cause, thank God. And so the Indians, too, are in the valley? I reckon they're on their annual hunt, though earlier than usual. Oh, wouldn't I like an introduction to that man Vandyke, and again have them outlaws as I had them yesterday!"

"I heard them mention your name—the name Stonewall Bob—several times since yesterday. They jested each other about Stonewall Bob and 'baptism,' and then they would laugh and curse. I also heard them talking about intercepting a party that was going in search of a Hidden Cache wherein there was buried a lot of gold."

"Sin and calamity!" exclaimed Stonewall Bob, "how on earth have they got wind of that expedition? Miss Thurston, I'm to join that party at the forks of the Grand Rivers, and if they intercept us—that is, me and the friends I am to meet there—they'll soon after be intercepted in Purgatory by old Satan. A young man from your settlement is to be one of that party of treasure-hunters. Perhaps you know him; it is Ben Clark."

"Ben Clark?" replied the maiden, her fair face becoming suffused with a tell-tale blush. "Yes, sir, I know him quite well. Were you to meet him soon?"

"This very night at Willow Island at the forks," the young plainsman responded. "But, condemn that villain Vandyke! I wish he were here now. Girl—pardon me, for it's got to come out—I'd splatter his carcass all over this range—Ah! there comes one of his associates now."

It was a coyote to which the youth alluded—a hungry, snarling beast attracted there by the dead buffaloes. It came up within a few paces of the Sentinel, as if to investigate the situation. Stonewall Bob gazed at it a moment, then whipping out his revolver sent a bullet through its brain.

Coolly replacing the weapon in his belt, the boy turned to Mabel and said:

"So you do not know, then, Miss Thurston, what has been your father's fate?"

"No, sir," she replied, with a deep sigh, "but I live in hopes that he is safe—I have prayed to Heaven for his safe return to me."

"I'll turn a bloody old infidel, if the Lord, whom my mother taught me was so merciful, hasn't heard your petition," the young giant declared; "but until we know his fate, Miss Mabel, you must place yourself under my protection."

"Thank you, Mr. Comstock—"

"Stonewall Bob—or Bob, please," interrupted the kind-hearted big border boy.

"Well, as I was going to say, Stonewall Bob," replied Mabel, with a faint smile, "I am in dire need of a friend, and yet I hate to be an incumbrance to you, and ask you to endanger your life for me."

"S'pose not," was the blunt reply, "but then I'm chap enough to volunteer to do so, and that with great pleasure. God didn't make me a big, overgrown calamity for nothin' and if I can be of service to you I will rejoice in the honor. I've heard so much of rangers, and hunters, and cowboys makin' heroes of themselves in behalf of beautiful young gals, that I've always had a desire to try my hand at it, and now that the opportunity's offered I'm goin' to let myself loose, and if the outlaws or Ingins give me half a show, by calamity, I'll fertilize this valley for the comin' generation o' farmers by strewin' it with the carcasses o' red-skins and freebooters. But this is what's called bluster, and bluster don't count much only when the enemy is in another territory, so if you'll come with me, I will take you to where I expected to meet my friends, and once there I assure you that you will be safe."

"But if my father should return here and find me gone—"

"Ah! there comes a horseman now from the east," exclaimed Bob, dropping his hand to his pistol.

"Mabel? Mabel, my child, are you alive?" came from the lips of the approaching rider.

"Thank God!" cried the maiden, her heart filled with a sudden joy, "it is my dear father!"

She leaped to the ground and ran to meet her father, who, dismounting, clasped her in his arms.

The first joy of their reunion over, Mabel

conducted her father to where Stonewall stood and introduced him to the young plainsman.

Then the two men hastily discussed the situation, which resulted in Joshua Thurston accepting Bob's proposition that he and his daughter go on to Willow Island with him.

"Then," said the boy, "let us be off. Miss Mabel, you ride my pony and I'll lead the way on foot."

"Oh, I could not think—" began the maiden.

"But you must," interposed the young giant, and he deliberately lifted her in his arms as though she were an infant and placed her in his saddle, saying, as he did so, "and you'll please excuse my outlaw-way of argument. Wouldn't I be a lovely hero, though, to go riding along, and the maiden I was heroing for sailing along afoot?" and the bluff, big-hearted boy laughed heartily at his own conceit.

Bob was about to give the word to start when he suddenly threw up his hand, saying in a low tone:

"By calamity! there's another horseman coming! and it's an Ingin, true as I'm here. Stand quiet, folks, and I'll surprise the fellow, for he's comin' right this way."

The young giant walked out to the wolf he had shot a short time before, and taking up the animal by the hind-legs, slowly advanced toward the red-skin. But the latter saw that all was not what he had supposed it to be, and drew rein when about ten paces from Bob, and leaning slightly forward and peering at the boy, uttered a low, guttural exclamation.

"Waugh!" answered Stonewall Bob, and at the same time he raised his arm and flung the dead wolf at the savage as though it were a mere kitten. The novel missile struck the red-skin in the stomach with a dull crash, and not only knocked him heels over head from his horse, but laid him breathless and speechless on the earth. And at the same moment almost, the young athlete sprang forward and seized the savage's horse, and in a twinkling was on the animal's back.

When Mr. Thurston and Mabel caught sight of the youth's face, it was all aglow with silent laughter.

"Stonewall," said Thurston, "you throw coyotes around like they were mice."

"I reckon that Ingin'll think a buffalo-bull run into him when he comes around," replied the boy; "and if it wasn't for the looks of the thing and the fear of drawin' others here, I'd sock a bullet through him. But now that we're all mounted I guess we'd better be amblin' along, and as we're all on borrowed horses we needn't be particular how fast we ride."

So saying, the three rode away, going almost due west up the valley.

They had not gone far when their ears were suddenly greeted by a series of wild, savage yells and shrieks behind them.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Stonewall Bob outright, "that red skin's got the kinks out of him and begun to pipe an evenin' carol; but let him pipe till the sun comes up, if he feels easier by so doin'. However, his harmonious trills are likely to call up some of his friends, and the further we're away then the more enchantin' it'll be for us."

And so they urged their animals on at a faster speed, and miles were soon passed over. They were congratulating themselves on their good luck in escaping further dangers when they were suddenly startled by a savage yell behind, that told them they were being pursued.

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Stonewall Bob, betraying no fear or surprise; "that's another tune, and first thing you know there'll be some more red-skins hurt. But a little more speed, friends, won't be out of order."

The fugitives urged on their horses to renewed speed, while ever and anon Stonewall Bob glanced back over his shoulder. But he said nothing, nor did his looks or actions betray the least sign of fear or uneasiness.

But finally Mabel, who rode between the youth and her father, saw the boy adjust his revolvers and unsling his carbine, which he carried muzzle downward at the side of his horse as if ready for instant use. These movements of the young plainsman convinced her that the savages were gaining upon them—that the brave boy realized that a conflict was inevitable.

CHAPTER V. OLD PEGLEG SOL.

"HALT there, and throw up, old man!"

This peremptory command was accompanied by the click of gun-locks, and he to whom the command was given quickly reined in his horse and dropped his hand to the pistol at his side.

The hour was between sunset and dark of the day preceding that of the events narrated in the foregoing chapter, and the place was a little grove on the banks of the South Fork of Grand River, not far from its junction with the North Fork.

The horseman who was so suddenly and unexpectedly brought to a stand was a man of perhaps fifty years of age. He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, barring the coonskin cap on his head. He was well armed and well mounted; and that he was a man of the border there could be no doubt, unless it should rise from the fact that he had but one leg.

But those who knew Old Sol Whistler knew that he was one of the most fearless and successful hunters on the northern hunting-grounds, notwithstanding he was a cripple.

A wooden peg, with a ferule and a sharp brad on the end of it, did service as a second limb, and it was from this that the old hunter had received the sobriquet of Old Pegleg Sol. His leg had been taken off half-way between the knee and thigh, but as he wore his pants-leg full length it concealed most of the wooden limb; but as he sat in his saddle this limb stuck outward almost at right-angles with his body, giving him, as a horseman, a decidedly comical appearance.

The old hunter had come down the river from the west, and his reception at the edge of the grove, wherein he had expected to encamp for the night, was a startling surprise to him. In fact, not seeing the one who had ordered him to halt, he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own hearing; but before he could draw his revolver, three men with guns leveled upon him stepped from cover of the bushes and confronted him. The old hunter saw that they were strangers, and he knew at a glance that they were freebooters of the prairie.

"Don't draw that iron, old man," exclaimed one of the villains, as he stepped from the brush; "jist you succumb quietly and no harm'll come to you."

"Rampin' tigers and blood!" retorted Pegleg Sol, "I'd like to know what you blear-eyed varmints want with me. If I've anything 'bout me you want, take it and let me pass on. I'm no hog, and if a feller's in need I'd even give him my wooden leg."

"You get down from that saddle," ordered the outlaw; "there are nothin' 'bout you we want but yourself. We don't mean to harm you, but we want you a few days in our camp in this grove to give it tone."

"I'll prove a white elephant on your hands, men," said Old Pegleg; "besides, I've an engagement with friends down the creek that—"

"Ay, that's the very point, exactly," said one of the outlaws; "we were aware of that fact, and were in waiting for you here, and have been three days, so you'll please dismount and consider yourself our guest."

"Not of my own free will," declared the old hunter.

A burly outlaw sprang at the old man and seizing him by the arm, dragged him from his horse. Then the three proceeded to disarm him, which they soon succeeded in doing.

"Now search his pockets for documents," said the leader of the outlaw trio; "he might have some information 'bout him of the Hidden Cache."

"So, ho!" exclaimed Old Sol, "that's what you're after, eh? Well, precious little good you'll git out of bangin' me around, for I know no more 'bout the Hidden Cache than you do."

"We understand that, Pegleg Sol, but you might have something of value about you so we'll search you anyhow."

The old man squared off and knocked the first one down that came in reach of him. It was not his nature to succumb quietly to indignities, and while he had nothing of value about his person, he proposed to fight just the same. But he was soon overpowered and borne down, though he gave the three outlaws a lively tussle, and, in the midst of the struggle, a weapon was discharged with a low, dull report, and one of the outlaws fell, shot through the abdomen, and died in a few moments.

At first the freebooters supposed that one of their own weapons had been discharged, accidentally, in the struggle with Old Pegleg; but an examination of their revolvers satisfied them of their being mistaken. They knew that Pegleg had not fired the shot, for they had disarmed him, and so they concluded it must have come from under cover of the grove, and if so, others were likely to follow it, and with no little uneasiness of mind, the two outlaws made haste to get away from there.

Their dead comrade was thrown across the

back of Pegleg's horse, the old hunter's hands were tied at his back, and then they marched off into the grove, Old Pegleg limping along through the weeds and undergrowth with remarkable ease and celerity.

After going about forty rods they came to a camp at the lower extremity of the grove, where they halted. There were two commodious tents pitched under the trees, and the place had the appearance of having been occupied some days.

Old Pegleg, with his hands still secured at his back, was tied to a tree, having sufficient rope given him to sit or lie down at pleasure.

The wound of the dead outlaw was not examined. It was found that the ball had passed through his abdomen and lodged just under the skin on the opposite side. With his knife one of the men removed the ball, and to their surprise found it was a small cartridge-ball of twenty-two caliber.

This discovery proved that the shot had come from an unknown quarter, for none of their men carried weapons of so light a caliber, nor were any of the firearms taken from Old Pegleg less than forty-five caliber.

That there was an enemy abroad in the grove the outlaws had no doubt now, but why that enemy had not fired a second and third shot as deadly as the first, when the same opportunity was offered, was a question they could not solve on any other grounds than that the slayer only sought the life of the one man.

Darkness coming on, Old Pegleg's blanket was spread for him to lie down upon, the outlaws seating themselves near him. The villains were afraid to strike a light, for the more they thought and pondered over the death of their friend the more the matter seemed to become involved in mystery.

For several hours they sat and quietly discussed the situation.

Old Pegleg laid down and in the course of a few minutes he fell asleep as was evidenced by his heavy breathing.

Thus the hours of night wore on. It was nearly midnight when the two outlaws were suddenly startled by the sound of approaching hoofs and the voices of men.

CHAPTER VI

THE TREASURE-HUNTERS.

ON a little island on the Grand River just where the two forks came together four men were encamped. They were all young men and, although they were dressed in buckskin, and unusually well armed, but a single one of them was a man of the border.

Frank Payne, the eldest of the party, was a man of five-and-twenty years.

Ben Clark was three-and-twenty.

Stephen Dockwood was twenty.

Nathan Renshaw was the youngest, being eighteen.

Ben Clark was a resident of Humboldt settlement on the Cheyenne River. The other three were friends of his from over in Eastern Iowa.

The island upon which they were encamped was a long, tongue-shaped strip of sandy soil covered with tall cottonwood saplings and fringed with a dense growth of willows. The river was not only wider here than elsewhere, but of considerable depth—so deep, in fact, that they were compelled to construct a raft on which to carry their outfit over from the mainland and upon which they could pass to and fro from the island.

They had six horses, two of which were pack-animals. These horses were kept at grass on the mainland during the day and then swam over to the island at night to prevent their straying off, or theft by roving Indian hunters or outlaws, should there be any abroad in that vicinity.

It is a pleasant September night when we introduce this party of young hunters to our readers. Up to this time they have been on the island two days and nights. They are there waiting the coming of others as had been previously arranged.

Reclining upon the earth about their camp-fire, they are smoking, telling stories, and passing the time as only free-hearted and rollicking young fellows can.

"Boys," Frank Payne finally observed, as he stretched himself out lazily upon his blanket, "if we have to lay around here feasting on the fat of the land much longer, I'll get so lazy I won't sit in my saddle. This thing of juicy buffalo-hump and venison for breakfast, and venison and buffalo for dinner, and both for supper, the way Ben Clark broils it, will load us all down with a superfluity of flesh."

"Don't let that worry you, Frank," replied Ben Clark, "for if it is true that there are hos-

tile Ingins in this country the red varlets 'll be apt to run some of the surplus fat off of us before we get that buried treasure."

"Do you really think there are hostile red-skins about, Ben?" asked young Renshaw.

"I am sure it was an Ingin I saw to-day in the dim distance," replied Ben. "It might have been a scout or the advance guard of a party of Ingin buffalo-hunters. This is a favorable hunting-ground for the Sioux, although it's a little early for their fall hunting."

"Wisdom of Solomon!" exclaimed Payne, "I hope no red-skins will show themselves until we have had a hunt for that hidden cache, although I haven't as much faith in the convict's confession as I had a month ago. The nearer we approach to the scene of the reputed Indian massacre, the more visionary this expedition seems."

"Well," declared Steve Lockwood, "gold-cache or no gold-cache, if Old Pegleg Sol and Stonewall Bob get here we can have a grand old buffalo-hunt, providing the red-skins don't dispute territory with us. Love of Jonathan! wouldn't I like to make one swoop down on that herd of buffaloes we saw up the North Fork to-day? If there was one bison in that herd there were a million. I'd 'a' sworn it was a district of burnt prairie, but when Ben declared it was a herd of buffaloes I was dumfounded. Boys, just think of a whole township covered with cattle as close as they can stand, and then you can have an inkling of the game Ben and I saw, and the deep, broad oceans of fun we could have."

"You don't suppose they'll stay there a month, do you?" demanded young Renshaw.

"They may rummage around in this valley several days," said Ben Clark, "if they're not disturbed, and—"

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed Payne, in evident excitement.

All four listened.

A deep, rumbling noise like distant thunder was heard over in the valley toward the north.

"It's the buffaloes!" exclaimed Clark, "they're moving now! they've been stampeded and are moving east as though the very Old Harry was after them."

"What do you think about it, Ben?" asked Payne.

"I think Ingins are at the bottom of it."

"And suppose they conclude to add our scalps to their catch of buffalo-skins?"

"It's very likely that before they get our hair a few Inginspirits 'll jump the narrow boundary of life into the happy hunting-grounds where bisons and treasure-hunters roam not on the plains."

"How far is that flying herd away, Ben?"

"Ten miles, anyhow."

"War of the Roses! it sounds as though they were just over the river. It must be a tremendous large—"

"Hullo, over there!"

It was a strange voice that thus hailed them from the south shore.

"Old Pegleg Sol! I'll bet a rabbit-skin!" exclaimed Ben Clark.

The four hunters, if we may so term them, at once hastened to the south side of the island.

"Hullo, over there!" Ben Clark shouted back, when they saw a man standing on the shore with a rifle resting on his arm.

"Well, who are you?" the unknown answered back.

"A party of gentlemen!" Ben shouted.

"From Humboldt?" inquired the stranger.

"Yes, are you Old Pegleg Sol?"

"No, I'm not Old Pegleg, but I'm here to meet you in Pegleg's place," was the response.

"Well, who are you?" asked Clark.

"Yellowstone Bill," came the answer.

"I never heard of such a man," said Ben, in an undertone to his companions, then raising his voice, he shouted to the stranger, "I don't know Yellowstone Bill, but I don't doubt your word. What's wrong with Old Pegleg?"

"Old Peg," the man answered, "is laid up at the fort with a broken arm—too much grizzly b'ar. When he found he couldn't come to meet you as he agreed, he axed me to come and help you hunt Captain Mercer's Hidden Gold-Cache. Them's my credentials, gentlemen."

"That's satisfactory, isn't it, boys?" asked Clark of his friends, who at once answered in the affirmative.

The raft was at once sent over to the shore, and Yellowstone Bill brought to the island and conducted to the camp, where he was given a hearty reception by the party.

The borderman was a man of perhaps fifty years of age, with a rough, bearded face and a keen, black eye. He was dressed in buckskin,

and armed with rifle, revolvers and the indispensable hunting-knife.

Laying aside his weapons, the old hunter took his place by the camp-fire with that social freedom so characteristic of the borderman, and then he took a pipe from his pocket, and filling it, lit it and began to smoke and talk.

"And so Old Pegleg Sol is down on his back?" Ben Clark finally remarked, anxious to know more of his old friend's condition.

"Yes, got hugged with a grizzly and some 'at chawed," replied Yellowstone Bill; "but the post surgeon said he'd pull through if he could git him all sewed together again."

"I hope so," added Ben Clark, "for I do think Old Peg is the dandiest old vagabond that ever roamed this wide range over. He's a whole brigade of fun and frolic."

"Yes," affirmed the hunter, "Old Peg's a good man, but he orter give up huntin', for an old man bummin' round wi' one leg in the grave and trying to fight grizzlies won't work successful."

"Does he carry crutches?" asked young Lockwood.

"No, he wears a straight wooden peg for a leg, and it'd surprise you to see him go scotchin' around on it," said Clark.

"Boys, not changin' the subject, how long ye been here?" queried Old Yellowstone.

"Two days, and this is the third night," answered Clark.

"I'd been here a day sooner," Old Bill went on, "if Peg hadn't held on to the last, hopin' to be able to come hisself. He war awful sorry, and sent you his best wishes, and hoped you'd find the pot of gold that Captain Mercer left hid somewhar in this valley years ago. But what 'bout that Hidden Cache, boys? Old Sol didn't tell me the 'ticulars—only said you folks 'd have a map, and so forth, locatin' the spot whar the gold war buried."

"Yes, I have such a map," said Payne, "though without some one that knows the valley well, it would be rather indefinite. That is why we engaged Pegleg Sol to assist us. He is well acquainted with these valleys."

"I think I understand these valleys as well, if not better than Old Pegleg hisself," asserted Yellowstone Bill, "but what are the facts, youngster, 'bout the Hidden Cache?"

"We got the first trace of it through a man named Goven, who died in the Anamosa State prison in Iowa some months ago. He had been put in for fifteen years and had served twelve at the time of his death. I was a deputy warden at the prison at that time, and when he saw that he must die he invited me to his bedside one day to listen to a revelation he had to make. I had been very kind to him, so he thought, and for this reason he made a confidant of me and told his story. He said that nearly thirteen years before he and a dozen others started with one Captain Brown Mercer on a trading expedition to the Yellowstone country. They embarked from Sioux City in bateaux. In addition to articles for trade with the Indians that they took along, they carried about twenty thousand dollars in gold with which to purchase furs of white traders. When near the mouth of the Grand River they learned through their scout that a large party of hostile Indians were encamped a few miles ahead on the river awaiting their coming. As they dared not attempt to run the gantlet with such a small force against such overwhelming odds, and through hopes of giving the Indians the slip, they turned up the Grand River. They had hopes of reaching the mountains by the route at a point where they could strike the village of some friendly Indians from whom they would purchase ponies and continue their journey."

"Well, he said the expedition succeeded in reaching a point near the forks of the two Grand Rivers when the hostile Indians headed them off. They were forced to leave the river and fall back into the open valley where they sought shelter in a kind of a 'blow-out.' They repulsed the red-skins in three attacks without the loss of a man, and as the savages finally withdrew from sight, they supposed they had gone for good, and so the party resumed their journey on foot, the Indians having destroyed their bateaux. But they had not gone a mile before the Indians appeared again, and so the party concluded to desert everything but their weapons and try and save their lives. Captain Mercer buried his gold in a couple of iron camp-kettles. He first removed the sod and then dug a hole, throwing the dirt on a blanket, then put in the kettles of gold, replacing the dirt and sod so carefully that not a trace of the cache could be seen. Then, in order to find the spot himself, Captain Mercer cut a cottonwood sprout from a

solitary, stunted bush that grew about two hundred yards from the *cache* and stuck it in the ground some two rods from the *cache*, letting it project just about two inches above the ground. Not over half a mile from where they abandoned their things, a horde of mounted savages swept down upon them, and there slew every man except Goven, who, catching an Indian pony, whose rider he had shot in the struggle, mounted and fled, and succeeded in escaping the savages. He said that he saw the last one of his friends shot down just as he caught the pony, and thought it was the greatest miracle in the world that he escaped death there to meet it in prison and in disgrace.

"After his escape from the savages he made his way across the plains to Sioux City, where he tried to sell the Indian pony, which he considered his by all that was fair, at least, in war, when he was accused of being a horse-thief, and in a moment of anger shot his accuser dead. For this he was arrested, tried and sentenced to fifteen years in the State Prison. Knowing that he was the sole survivor of the massacre he kept the secret of the buried treasure, determined to secure it when released. But, alas! the fell destroyer seized upon him. When he saw that he must die, he made this revelation to me and expressed a hope that I might find the *cache*, and obtain the gold, and live to enjoy it. He then drew me a map of the Grand River country, marking the spot as near as possible where the massacre occurred. He also described several landmarks in the vicinity of the *cache*, but as many of them are liable to have been changed with the lapse of time, he advised me to secure the service of some old hunter who had been familiar with the Grand River valley for years, and who would, if any of the marks he mentioned were gone, remember where they had been.

"This was the substance of Goven's story. He died three days after. My two friends and I had already planned a buffalo-hunt in Western Nebraska, but after hearing Goven's story we concluded to come up here and hunt for gold as well as buffaloes. I wrote my friend Clark here, of Humboldt Settlement, the whole particulars, and of our proposed hunt, and instructed him to employ a guide, which he did, making arrangements for him—Old Pegleg Sol—to meet us here on or about this time. We were also to be met here by a noted young plainsman called 'Stonewall Bob.' This now is the story of the Hidden Gold *Cache*, and the map of Goven's, which I have here in my pocket, I will now show you."

Frank Payne put his hand into an inner pocket of his hunting-jacket to procure the paper, and, just as he did so the whole party was startled by a piercing shriek—the shriek of a woman that was followed by the report of firearms and a wild, demoniac, savage yell!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOY TROJAN IN TROUBLE.

THE sounds that had so suddenly startled the party on the island came from the north side of the river, and forgetting all else, the hunters seized their rifles and ran down to the edge of the river.

Looking across the water they saw, on the sharp point of land made by the junction of the two rivers, a woman seated upon a horse or pony, while further on were two horsemen turned facing a horde of advancing savages, and pouring shot after shot into the ranks of the yelling fiends.

"By the harp of David!" exclaimed Ben Clark "there's somebody in trouble—one a woman, too! Boys, shall we go to their assistance?"

"By all means," replied Frank Payne, "we'd be cowards not to do so. To the raft, boys, to the raft!"

"Men," said Yellowstone Bill, "it'll be death to go over there—wuss nor suicide."

"Death and suicide it is, then!" declared Ben Clark, starting for the raft, followed by his friends, guns in hand.

In a few moments the young hunters had boarded the raft. Ben Clark seized the pole and began warping the float away from the shore even before Old Yellowstone Bill had got aboard. The old man had plenty time to leap on, but he hesitated, and the next instant the raft was out of his reach.

"I'll not go back now," said Clark, somewhat surprised at the old hunter's conduct; "Old Pegleg Sol'd 'a' been the first man on here."

The young hunters were compelled to pass half around the island before making toward the scene of conflict.

When they came in sight of the point they saw that the woman had disappeared. One of

the men was also gone, and the other was standing alone on the very verge of the point, engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with a dozen or more savages.

"Roarin' rivers!" cried Ben Clark, as he caught sight of the man struggling with the foe, "that is my friend, Stonewall Bob! Boys, let loose into the red demons, but be careful of the Boy Trojan—Hurrah! Yellowstone Bill's bangin' it to 'em from the island!"

The three young hunters at once opened fire upon the red-skins, while at regular intervals Old Bill's rifle rung out on the island.

"Hold on to them, Bob, friends are comin'!" shouted Ben Clark at the top of his lungs as he plied the pole with all his strength.

Driven to the very extreme verge of the point Stonewall Bob stood battling like one possessed for his life. Protected in the rear by the perpendicular bank he was enabled to keep the foe before him. Knives and tomahawks gleamed in the moonlight, and flew through the air about the head of the young giant. Like a Trojan, indeed, he stood with clubbed carbine beating down the howling mob as they closed in within reach. Never did man seem to bear a life more charmed. Like a stone wall in fact he stood firm defying the storm and assaults of the foe.

The bank behind the young Trojan, and, in fact, on either side, was fully ten feet high and slightly projecting, and in order to effect a landing the rescuing party must pass the point almost under the boy giant, push into the mouth of the North Fork and pass on a few yards to where they could see the bank was low.

As they passed the point an Indian came whirling over the bank and fell sprawling into the river—knocked senseless by Stonewall's clubbed carbine.

The savages seemed determined to take the young giant alive. It was not at all likely that the approach of those on the raft had been unseen; but the foe gave no attention to them, every energy being bent upon the capture of the boy giant before assistance could reach him.

Suddenly, as if by a preconcerted movement, and with a wild, infernal scream, the whole pack of human wolves closed in upon the brave boy. The young plainsman staggered back and as he stood reeling on the edge of the bank endeavoring to maintain his balance, a dozen savage hands seized him. But at this very instant the bank broke away and the young Trojan and nearly a score of red-skins were precipitated into the river with a thunderous splash. Tons of earth went down beneath them, creating a vortex into which the raft of the four young hunters was drawn and almost swamped.

A scene of wildest confusion now ensued. Amid the boiling, bubbling waters savage heads and heels, arms and legs, became promiscuously mixed up. As head after head popped to the surface spouting water like so many wounded whales, the young hunters on the raft looked eagerly for their friend; nor were they kept in suspense. Up from the very center of the vortex they saw his massive head and broad shoulders rise.

With a puff like that of an engine—with a snort like that of a mad bull, the young giant glanced around him—merely sweeping his eyes across those on the raft, who were shouting words of encouragement to him—and quickly taking in the situation, he began to reach out right and left, and pound the head of every red-skin that came in reach—beating them down under the waves, at the same time shouting with brazen lungs:

"Down to Satan, you red demon!—down to your home in fiend-land! git thar, to the sulphur-pit! Ho! ho! you red scorpions! fool with another calamity, will you? Yoop! hur-rah!"

In the meanwhile, several red-skins rising to the surface, had endeavored to save themselves by clinging to the raft, but they at once became a target for the amateurs' revolvers, and in a short period of time every savage had disappeared from sight that was not drowned or slain.

Then again the valley resounded with yells of triumph from Stonewall's lips, in which he was joined by the men on the raft.

Finally, turning in the water and looking up into the face of Ben Clark, the Boy Trojan said, reaching up his hand:

"Ben, old boy, I'm all broke up with joy to meet you! You must excuse me for not speaking sooner, but you know business is business—first come first served—I was engaged with other company that called first, and I was compelled, through courtesy, to receive them first. Well, how've you been, old Ben?"

"Happy, baby Bob," responded Ben; "but, say, climb up here and let me see if you've grown—let me help you—here you are—heavens! hope

the raft won't swamp—Bob Comstock, these are my friends—Frank Payne, Steve Lockwood and Nathan Renshaw."

"Glad to meet you, boys," said Stonewall, shaking hands with each of them, "if it is under peculiar circumstances. I'm a little damp from bein' in that wet water. Hope we'll become better acquainted soon."

"I hope so, indeed," responded Paine. "I'm anxious to become acquainted with a boy that can lick a whole Ingin tribe in a stand-up fight."

"That was a miraculous old fight," replied Stonewall, "and how I ever escaped death is a miracle. The red demons shot at me, threw tomahawks at me, stabbed at me, struck at me, yelled at me, kicked at me, and the Lord only knows what else; and I'm rather thinkin' if that bank hadn't caved off when it did the devils'd have got away with me."

"If we could only have landed when we reached the point behind you," said Frank Payne, "we could have rendered you some assistance; but the fact is when we got up to the bank it was so high that we could neither see you nor the red-skins, and we only escaped being buried under that falling bank by the skin of our teeth."

While he was thus talking Ben Clark pushed the raft back to the island and the party landed and was greeted by Yellowstone Bill, who exclaimed:

"Boys, yer shoved off yer raft too quick for me, but then I put in a few tellin' shots from the island here. Stonewall Bob, I are glad to meet ye and git a grip o' yer paw. I are Yallerstone Bill, I are, and I'm from away up the kentry."

"And is here in Old Pegleg's place," said Ben Clark.

"What's the matter with Pegleg?" asked the boy giant.

"Too much squeezin' by a grizzly," replied Old Bill.

"And he sent you in his place?" observed Bob.

"Ya-as, sir," Stonewall Bob knitted his brows and gazed away reflectively up the river, then starting, he turned to Ben Clark and said:

"Ben, I have some dreadful sad news for you. A very dear friend of yours is in trouble."

"What do you mean, Bob?" asked Ben, betraying some emotion.

"Mabel Thurston and her father are in the hands of the outlaws and savages."

"Great God! you are jesting, Bob!"

"I'm not, Ben; I rescued the girl from peril after that herd of stampeded buffaloes had passed, but the savages cornered us there on the point, and both she and her father were spirited away while I was battling with those demons."

Ben Clark groaned in agony of spirit, for to him Mabel Thurston was more than all else on earth, and for a while his grief was inconsolable. It was all his friends could do to restrain him from rushing madly away in search of the maiden, when such a course would have been almost criminal folly.

"It was not Ingins, however," Stonewall at length continued, "that first abducted her from home, but your old rival, Archibald Vandyke."

This news was more startling than the first, and the young settler almost staggered under the blow. His face turned pale and his eyes glowed with a kindling fire of vengeance. It was some moments before he could speak.

"I knew Vandyke was a man without principle," he finally said, "but I did not suppose he was a demon. Boys, we cannot remain idle when our help, our manhood, and even our lives if need be, are demanded in the protection of innocent womanhood."

"We'll have to go keerful, boy," said Yellowstone, advisedly.

"Yes, you said the same a while ago!" replied Ben, with no little asperity; "it seems to me if we never risk anything we will never gain anything. You predicted sure death to venture to Stonewall's aid, but we're all back safe."

"But, lad," said the old hunter, coolly, calmly, seeming to take no offense at his words of reproach, "I know the impulsiveness o' youth and hev see'd whar it cost in years agone. The death o' them red-skins over the river will stir up a hornets' nest, and if we rush wildly, blindly, into a trap, you see we cut off all hope for the gal's rescue."

"Boys," said Stonewall Bob, "not wishing to change the subject, but I must shed these wet garments and dry 'em before I can do anything more; and as for a rifle, I've got to draw on you folks, for my carbine's at the bottom o' that river, all smashed to calamity over red-skin pates."

"All right, Bob," said Frank Payne, "we've

more guns than gunners—got three extra Sharpes."

So the party returned to the camp, Yellowstone Bill volunteering to remain at the edge of the island on guard.

As soon as they had reached the camp, Stonewall Bob turned to his four friends and said in an undertone:

"Boys, I don't know Yellowstone Bill, and I don't like the way he shoots off his yawp. He may be all right, but I don't like to trust my life in the hands of a stranger. The fact is, I'm just green enough to be governed by a first impression, and that of Old Yellowstone wasn't favorable, and if one of you boys'll go down and stay with him till I get my clothes dried, I'll relieve you when I do."

"I'll go," said Ben Clark, "for I've about the same opinion of Old Bill that you have."

So saying, he departed, while Stonewall Bob divested himself of his wet clothes and hung them up before the fire to dry, wrapping his gigantic form in a blanket, for he could not get into any of the extra clothing of the amateurs.

The Boy Trojan found that he had not come out of the fight with the savages unharmed. There were several ugly bruises and cuts on his head, breast and arms, and to these Frank Payne gave his attention and knowledge of surgery, and soon had the bruises anointed with arnica, and the cuts plastered over—the amateurs having supplied themselves before leaving home with medical and surgical goods in anticipation of just such accidents.

While Payne was dressing the youth's wounds Nathan Renshaw broiled him some slices of venison and made him a cup of coffee which the young giant partook of with a keen appetite.

After he had satisfied his hunger and conversed awhile he donned his clothes, that by this time were dry, and then proceeded to clean up his revolvers and reload them with cartridges furnished from the ample supplies of the amateurs. This done, he selected a rifle from among the extras on hand, and having loaded it, announced himself ready for action.

Scarcely had he uttered the words when the report of a rifle fell upon their ears coming from the upper end of the island with startling fierceness.

"Come on, boys!" shouted the young borderman, crashing away through the undergrowth like a mad bull, "come on, for I guess there's another calamity on hand!"

The others took up their rifles and hurried after him.

On his way through the darkness of the grove Stonewall Bob ran square up against Ben Clark, who was rushing toward the camp.

"Crash—bang—stars!" exclaimed the young giant; "is that you, Ben? What's wrong up here?"

"Come and I'll show you," replied Clark.

The young settler led the way to the upper end of the island, stopping just under cover of the shadows. He then parted the willows and pointed out across the moonlit waters toward two large masses of driftwood and brush that were slowly drifting out of the mouth of the North Fork.

"Behind them two floating masses of logs and debris," said Ben, "there are no less than a score of Indian warriors that are endeavoring to steal a march upon us!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A SURPRISE-PARTY SURPRISED.

"BOYS," said Stonewall Bob, in an undertone, "we're going to have a real pretty little fight, and what we want to do is to hold our fire till the red roses bloom into sight, and then warp it to them as fast as we can finger the machinery. We don't want to let a ki-yote of them get under cover of this island. Where's Yellowstone Bill?"

"Right here, ready for ther fun," came the hunter's voice from the shadows hard by.

"Say, pards, I want one o' them big shotguns at camp," said Bob, "loaded with buckshot to the muzzle."

"All right, your wish shall be granted," and Frank Payne hurried to camp and returned with three shotguns, all of which the young hunter said had been "loaded for bear" for three days and nights.

Stonewall took one of them, and pushing the muzzle through the willows, fired at the head of a savage. The report of the piece sounded through the night like the roar of a field-gun, the recoil fairly staggering the young plainsman, who exclaimed:

"Ghosts and calamity! the thing works both ways, don't it? She kicked my whole shoulder

'bout off. I wonder how that Ingin's head fared?"

A peep through the bushes revealed quite a commotion in the water behind one of the drifting heaps, and the party felt well satisfied that the red-skin had not escaped unharmed, although they could hear no sound.

The shot, however, did not effect any change in the course or advance of the drifting barricades. In fact, it soon became evident that the cunning red-skins had met with a difficulty they had not calculated upon. The current at the junction of the two rivers was not only a little swifter, but the meeting of the two streams produced a slight swirl in it that, all of a sudden, whirled the two bunches of drift around, exposing the savages to the full view of those on the island.

The hunters lost no time in taking advantage of this lucky turn in the situation, and shotguns and revolvers belched tongues of flame from the dark fringe of willows with murderous effect.

The red-skins that escaped these deadly broadsides did so by diving under their floating breastworks, and seeking refuge on the other side, where they were content to stay, without any attempt to call at the island until the current had carried them out of reach of further danger.

In the mean time, a number of savages along the shore had opened fire on the island, but as their shots were at random they did no harm, though the bullets cut through the foliage over the heads of the hunters with a spiteful "zip."

It was at this juncture that Old Yellowstone set himself in good favor with all his friends by "winging" three red-skins in rapid succession—displaying no little skill as a marksman in doing so, the savages being over on shore.

Thus the conflict had again ended—most triumphantly, too, for the hunters—and in a few minutes not even a lurking foe was to be seen on either shore.

The situation was again discussed. Stonewall Bob had not a doubt but that the savages would have recourse to some other expedient to capture the island. In this opinion Yellowstone Bill concurred, and finally the old hunter concluded to go ashore and make a reconnaissance. To this no one interposed any objection, and the old man was at once taken ashore on the raft.

An hour later the moon went down, and a foreboding darkness settled over the island. The return of Yellowstone Bill was being expected and discussed, when the silence of the hour was suddenly broken by the distant report of firearms, the mingled shouts of men and yells of savages.

"By calamity!" exclaimed Stonewall Bob, "the red devils are at work up the river! But who now can they be trying to butcher? Just listen! Boys, that's a nasty old fight goin' on."

"Perhaps they and the outlaws have quarreled over the division of spoils and captives," suggested young Lockwood.

"It would be a glorious thing for the spoils and captives if the villains would only exterminate each other," replied Stonewall; "but that's not at all probable. I am afraid it is an attack on a party of hunters more exposed than we, and who are having to suffer for the punishment we gave the savages. Boys, just listen! it's a furious fight, and it might be that we could be of great service to some one. Shall we go?"

"Yes," was the response of each man.

"Then let us be off at once."

So saying they took up their guns, proceeded to the raft and crossed over to the south shore; but they had scarcely landed before the sounds of the conflict had entirely died away and a profound and oppressive silence followed.

"Boys, the fight's over with," said Stonewall Bob, half-regretfully, "and no difference which side whipped, it is not at all probable that we can do any good now. It will not be more than two hours until morning, and we can then investigate the matter—providing our scout, Old Yellowstone, don't bring in the facts in the case before."

"Then shall we go back to the island?" asked Ben Clark.

"By all means; we can't afford to stay along here in this before-dawn-darkness—the very time that the red-skin usually prefers to murder and plunder," answered Bob.

After considerable more discussion, the five men turned and boarded the raft to return to the island; but before they had pushed out from shore Old Yellowstone made his appearance from up the South Fork and was taken aboard.

"What's that racket mean up the river, Bill?" Stonewall Bob inquired, as the raft was swung off from the shore.

"It meant blood and destruction," the old hunter responded. "It war a fearful fight—a massacre."

"Between the Ingins and whom?"

"A party o' six or eight white men—hunters, I suppose. They war aboard a raft constructed o' logs, and as I s'pose, war driftin' with the current down the river when they war sot upon by a horde o' red-skins, and every man butchered arter a resolute fight in which they just slaughtered the Ingins. They war a brave crew o' fellers, but I think they war no experienced bordermen, or they'd never been entrapped. The raft is still floatin' down this way, fairly kivered with dead men and Ingins. Arter the fight war over, and I war sure all dangers war past, I throwed off my clothes and swum over to the raft to see if thar war any wounded whites that needed help, and ter see if I knowed any of 'em. But not a man did I know, nor war a man o' them alive. I think the crew war all asleep when fu'st attacked, and that makes me think they war amateur hunters unaware o' the presence o' danger, and had no one on guard."

"Boys, when the raft reaches here," said Ben Clark, "we must investigate the matter and ascertain who the whites are, and give them Christian burial."

"Yes, we'll investigate the matter," said Stonewall Bob turning away in a thoughtful mood, and leaving his friends in conversation with Old Bill where they had landed on the island.

The old hunter gave it as his opinion that no further dangers would be visited upon them that night, at least. He thought that the two defeats that the foe had already sustained in their attacks on Willow Island had taught them discretion; and since they—the amateur hunters—had had no sleep that night the old man thought they could now seek rest with impunity.

With this assurance they all proceeded to camp where they were joined by Stonewall, who told them to lie down and rest, and he would stand guard until morning. This they did, and soon the island was as noiseless as the grave.

An hour went by when the sleepers were suddenly aroused by Stonewall Bob, who said:

"Boys, get your rifles and shotguns and come with me, quick."

"What are wrong, Stunwall?" asked Old Yellowstone Bill, starting up drowsily.

"Come along and I'll show you," answered Bob.

The Boy Trojan led the way to the upper end of the island.

By this time it was nearly broad daylight. Objects could be distinctly seen several rods away.

"Look there," said Stonewall, pointing up the river through an opening in the bushes before him.

Looking as directed all saw a raft floating with the current down toward the island.

"It are the raft with them dead men," said Old Yellowstone.

"Yes," responded Bob, in a low tone.

Plainly could they see the bodies lying upon the raft. They lay in every conceivable attitude that a deadly, hand-to-hand contest would have left them. Some hung partially over the edge of the raft, their hands dragging in the water. Some were lying face up, some face downward. Some lay across others, some lay stretched at full length on the raft.

"It are a silent old crew, boys," remarked Old Bill.

"Very," was the laconic reply of Stonewall Bob, who seemed not a little affected by the scene of death.

Slowly the raft drifted on with its voiceless crew.

"It's going to lodge against the island," said young Renshaw.

"Of course it is," responded Stonewall.

While awaiting the approach of the raft with its motionless forms, the sun suddenly peeped up over the eastern plain, and then the watchers could see that the hands, and faces and bodies of the raftsmen were covered with blood.

"It's been a gory struggle," said Frank Payne, with a shudder of horror at the ghastly sight.

"Yes, but you boys hold your weapons in readiness and there will soon be a gorier struggle," replied Stonewall.

"What do you mean, Bob?"

"I mean that every devil of them fellows is alive! It's but another damnable scheme to entrap and butcher us, and I'll prove it."

The raft was now not over twenty feet from the island. Stonewall turned, and like a lion suddenly leaping from its concealment in the

jungle upon the timid spring-bok, he sprung upon Old Yellowstone Bill, seized him by the neck and the hip, and with an effort that seemed almost superhuman he raised the form of the old hunter above his head and hurled him from the island into the center of the advancing raft.

"Go to your friends, you old demon and traitor!" the young giant fairly hissed, his face livid with rage.

A yell burst from Old Bill's lips as he shot through the air, and the sound of his voice seemed to call the motionless warriors on the raft into life for each and every one of them instantly leaped to his feet with a frightful yell.

"Fire, boys!" shouted Stonewall Bob, and before the words had scarcely been uttered, five revolvers were pouring their deadly contents into the ranks of the foe.

The wily red-skins had, after all their pains and cunning, been the party surprised; and Old Yellowstone paid the penalty of his treachery, so opportunely discovered by Stonewall Bob, with his life.

CHAPTER IX.

LIVELY TIMES AT THE OUTLAW CAMP.

LET US now follow Mabel Thurston whom the fates had for the second time placed in the power of her outlaw admirer, Arch Vandyke.

The outlaws, however, did not take part in her rescue from Stonewall nor have a hand in the conflict with the Boy Trojan on the river-bank. It was not until both she and her father had been captured by the savages and hurried away by a few of them, while the others engaged the young giant, that Black Bluford and his followers coming upon the Indians demanded the possession of the maiden.

After a short parley the outlaws were permitted to take her, the savages retaining her father who was conducted away toward the Indian camp up the North Fork.

Mabel was, by her own request, permitted to ride the pony that had belonged to Stonewall Bob, and as the animal was led around to where she stood, Black Bluford exclaimed:

"Boys, do you recognize that pony? Did you ever see it before, eh? Speak, Joker Jim, and you, too, Mexy Dan."

"It seems to me I have," replied Joker Jim; "if I remember right the gentleman of the mushroom growth and flabby muscle that entertained us yesterday noon on the banks of the Missouri, rode such an animal."

"Exactly," said Black Bluford with an oath; then of the Indians he inquired as to how they had come in possession of the pony; and upon learning the facts, and that the Indians had left a number of their friends to slay the boy giant on the river-bank, the outlaws' joy knew no bounds.

Mexy Dan, whose sore body and battered face bore witness of the rough handling he had received at the hands of the young plainsman, became almost frantic with delight, and declared his intention of riding on to the forks of the river just to kick the body of the dead giant—the Indian assuring him that the big foe was dead ere that and his scalp hanging at the girdle of a warrior. But being dissuaded by his friends from so foolish a trip, he declared he would wait there the coming of the other warriors, that he might look upon the scalp of the boy giant. But this, too, was all bluster, for when his friends moved away he went with them.

Again Mabel was ruthlessly separated from her father, and though the parting was sad and heart-rending indeed, it had none of the awful, agonizing terrors of the first parting that night when she left him bound down helpless to the earth.

The outlaws moved away toward the west, crossed the North Fork of the Grand River, and then bore away in a southwesterly direction, until they came to the camp on the South Fork, where they were greeted by the friends in charge of the camp.

Mabel was taken from the saddle and conducted into one of the two canvas tents pitched there under some cottonwood trees.

A dim light from a smoldering camp-fire relieved the camp of its gloom, and as she was taken to the tent Mabel saw an old man in a hunter's garb lying on a blanket, hard by, his hands bound at his back. She recognized him at a glance as Old Pegleg Sol, who had often been at Humboldt settlement. The old man appeared to be asleep when they arrived, but he roused up at the sound of the new-comers' voices and gazed about him.

"Land of delight!" exclaimed Black Bluford, at sight of Old Pegleg, "and I see you boys have got your man Pegleg."

"Yes, but it cost us the life of brave Pistol Pete," replied one of the old hunter's captors in a grave tone.

The outlaw chief seemed shocked by this news, for the dead man was a favorite friend of his, and he declared with many horrible oaths that Pistol Pete should be avenged.

An hour after the outlaws reached camp another person in a hunter's garb put in an appearance. It was the man whom we have known as Yellowstone Bill, but whose real character was that of a villain and who was known among his friends as Cougar Bill.

Traitor that he was, he came there directly from the island where the amateur hunters were encamped, bringing the exasperating news of the defeat of the savages in both their attempts to capture Stonewall Bob and the island.

Black Bluford went into a fit of rage. He cursed the red-skins, his followers, and himself, until his face grew blacker than it was with passion. To add still more fuel to the fire of rage burning within his wicked breast, Old Pegleg Sol remarked:

"Old buck ki-yote, you'll tooth your chin if ye ar'n't keeful. What a luscious fool ye make o' yerself, slashin' round here."

The outlaw chief fired an oath at the old hunter, and Mabel, who was watching and listening from her prison lodge, trembled for the safety of the borderman.

Black Bluford had scarcely become settled down when his feelings were again harrowed up by the appearance of the savages who had survived the conflict with Stonewall Bob and the attempted capture of Willow Island. They came straggling in looking as if they had just escaped the ragged edge of a cyclone. They were wet and their faces were haggard with the chagrin of defeat. Most of them were more or less battered, bruised and bleeding, and a few of them seriously wounded.

Black Bluford gathered them—a score in all—about the fire and made them a speech that had a very mollifying effect upon their depraved spirits; and then, while the redoubtable Mexy Dan, who had a strong "fellow-feeling" for the red-skins who had felt the power of Stonewall Bob's good right arm, proceeded to dress the despoiled warriors' wounds, the outlaw chief turned to Old Cougar Bill and said:

"Well, Cougar, how were you received by the buffalo treasure-hunters at Willow Island?"

"Bumfustic; they took in my little story like sunshine, and at once accepted Yellowstone Bill into full fellowship."

"And did you get the information we want in relation to the Hidden Gold Cache?"

"Not a darned 'mation—not a squint at the convict's map. Frank Payne narrated the whole story to me of the convict—Goven's—revelation, just exactly as Arch Vandyke there overheard Ben Clark, of Humboldt Settlement, narrate the story to his sweetheart—*she in that tent there*—some months ago, under the shadows of old Thurston's vine and fig tree. When he got through 'ith his story he war just goin' to show me the map, when the Ingins raised a hellibuskian noise just across the river and cut things short right there. But for that I'd possess the secret o' that hidden gold. Since then no good opportunity has offered to interduce the subject ag'in 'ithout the danger o' raisin' spicion. Them fellers are all up ter stuff if they are amateurs, and since that big, maul-fisted Stunwall Bob has got thar, a feller feels as tho' he war creepin' through a nest o' sleepin' grizzlies and war afeard he'd wake 'em. Once or twice I war sure the big man-masher 'd got onto my racket, the way he looked at me and spoke. They're all lightnin' on the shoot, and if ever they're took in it's got to be by surprise. Comin' up the river by great heaps of driftwood, an ijee popped into my head, and that war to build a raft out o' them logs—a good-sized one, too—and then you fellers and the red-skins get up a sham fight—that is, yell and shoot like all furies so's the chaps at the island can hear the sound o' the conflict—strew the raft with dead—kill a hoss if necessary for blood to daub things with, and then let the raft with its lifeless warriors float down the river and lodge ag'in the island, and the moment it touches let the dead arise like Lazarus and skip forth onto the island with the proper tools for short work."

"But maybe that might not work out as you figure it," said Bluford.

"I'll see that it does, though," Cougar Bill went on. "I'll help it along, anyhow. You see, I, Yallerstun Bill, am out now on a scout—reconnoiterin'. After you've built the raft and fit your fight so the boys can hear the din o' battle, I'll rush back and report a gory attack on a raft-load o' hunters driftin' down-stream, in which all war killed and war left, with the dead Ingins, also, on the raft, floatin' down-stream.

If you'll do this and hurry up, you'll jist 'bout git round to the island 'bout time it's darkest."

"Cougar," said Black Bluford, "you're a fer-tile-brained villain, and I'll sound the boys here—red and white—on your scheme."

This the outlaw did, and all at once indorsed the plan, the Indians becoming quite jubilant over the thought of avenging the death of their friends and wiping out their own disgrace.

All the party but three at once proceeded down the river to construct the raft and carry out Old Bill's cunning scheme, and how well that scheme succeeded the reader has already seen in the preceding chapter.

The three men left at camp in charge of Mabel Thurston and Old Pegleg Sol were whites, one of whom was Mexy Dan, to whom Vandyke gave explicit orders to watch Mabel closely and constantly until he returned, and the other two were men who had been slightly wounded during the night.

After a few minutes had passed Mexy Dan said to his two companions:

"Boys, lay down and take a nap and I'll keep watch. You fellers need sleep and rest."

The two outlaws at once availed themselves of this opportunity for rest, and each wrapping a blanket about him, laid down upon the ground.

Mexy Dan seated himself at Mabel's tent, facing the fire, and fell into a sort of reverie.

Old Pegleg Sol, apparently asleep, watched the villain closely. He saw the fellow glance ever and anon at the tent in which the maiden was confined. He saw a fiendish light in his little gray eyes, and a sensuous, repulsive smile contort the vampire lips. And finally, with the look of a fiend incarnate, the outlaw arose to his feet, cast a furtive glance around him, and then started toward the tent. He reached it, and was in the act of pushing aside the flap-door, when the dull "ping" of a firearm sounded behind him, and with a cry of pain the villain staggered back and fell heavily to the earth.

Quickly the two dozing outlaws sprung to their feet, one of them exclaiming:

"Great Moloch! what's up here? Didn't I hear a shot fired?"

"Yes," said Old Pegleg, drowsily starting up, "for I heard it too."

"Bloody blazes! there lies Mexy Dan, and he's been shot. A foe must be lurkin' in the shadows, and he's the same one that killed Pistol Pete."

While one of them advanced to the side of Mexy Dan, the other examined Old Pegleg's bonds, which he found still secure.

"Whoever fired that shot at Mexy shot to kill, for Mexy's dead as a smelt," declared the startled and brutal outlaw, as he felt his prostrate comrade's pulse.

"Bloody Moloch!" exclaimed the other; "then we're in danger. Hadn't we better put this fire out?"

"It's a good idee, Racker, but let's see that ther girl's all safe fust. It might be *she's* got a little pop concealed 'bout her and 's done that murderous shootin'."

As the fellow spoke he turned to the tent and pulling aside the door, put his head inside. Just as he did so, "ping" went that mysterious weapon again, and turning quickly he saw his friend Racker reel to and fro and fall to the ground. At the same time he saw a little puff of blue smoke hanging on the air within the circle of dim light.

The outlaw ran to his friend's side. Racker tried to speak, but only a rattling, gurgling sound came from his lips.

The remaining outlaw's face grew white. He glanced nervously around him at the vanishing puff of smoke, and then again at his dying friend as if to solve the mystery of the murderous shot. The dying man seemed to divine his thoughts and wish, and raising his arm with a labored effort he pointed his trembling finger straight at the form of Old Pegleg Sol!

CHAPTER X.

PEGLEG SOL GETS IN SOME WORK.

ALMOST dizzy with a sense of fear the surviving outlaw turned his eyes toward Old Pegleg, and as he did so he saw a vivid flash before him, heard the report of a weapon, and with a cry, he staggered forward and fell dead by the side of Racker.

Then it was that Old Pegleg Sol sprung to his feet, his hands unshackled, his bearded face aglow with triumph. Straight toward Mabel Thurston's tent he limped in all haste, and dashing inside of it he exclaimed:

"Gal, how's tricks in here? be you tied up? Don't git skeer'd. I'm Old Pegleg Sol—not handsome nor cute, but rough and handy."

"I know Pegleg Sol," Mabel replied; "I have seen him at Humboldt Settlement."

"Then come right out here and let me undo your bonds, and we'll promenade away from here. The outlaws got sick and keeled over, and I'm lord o' the sitewation. There, now, you're free."

"Who shot those bad men, Sol?" the maiden asked, as they emerged from the tent.

"Death, gal, death took 'em a jolt in the maw; but come now, and we'll get a hoss apiece and amble off over the prairo like a pair o' tortie-doves. This way, Miss Mabel."

Old Sol led the way through the narrow belt of timber out into the plain where several horses were tethered, all saddled, with the bridles hanging upon their necks.

Recognizing Stonewall Bob's pony among the animals, the old hunter secured it and assisted Mabel into the saddle, then he unfastened his own horse, put the bits in its mouth and gave the rein to Mabel. Next he unfastened half a dozen of the outlaws' ponies. To the tail of one he tied another, and in this way he secured all the others, then mounting his own horse, and taking the rein of the foremost of the confiscated ponies, rode away with Mabel at his side, the string of mustangs following quietly behind.

It was now quite dark, for the moon had gone down, but this darkness favored the fugitives. They rode westward into the plain, talking but little.

Old Sol was bareheaded and every hair on his head, and his face too, for that matter, seemed to stand out on end, and his bright, keen eyes seemed to fairly burn into the night.

Knowing the old frontiersman as she did, Mabel felt entirely safe under his protection, although she felt that a bit of mystery hung around the old man, and the secret source of the power that had enabled him to escape the three outlaws' hands.

They rode on until the sky before them began to grow red, and then Mabel saw that they had so changed their course since starting that they were going directly eastward, and as she imagined, right back to where they had started.

"Sol, will we not run into danger going in this direction?" she at length inquired.

"I hope not, little one," replied Pegleg. "I want to strike the river opposite Willer Island, for thar's a hull lot o' young war-hosses there if they haven't been slain by the minions o' that sulphurian Cougar Bill. But Stonewall Bobby's not so easily caught as a sucker on a pin-hook."

"Then Stonewall Bob is safe?"

"Yas, he war at last accounts."

"Oh, I'm so thankful!" the girl exclaimed. "Bob is such a big, strong, brave fellow."

"He's a hull family in one in gentleness, bravery and dare-deviltry. If I war a nice little gal o' 'bout seventeen, and my name war Maple, I'd love-lasso that big boy for a husband."

Before Mabel could respond to the old man's peculiar remark the form of a man suddenly rose up in the grass before them, and pointing a pistol at Old Sol's head, said:

"Halt! you infernal old devil, and git down and die!"

Scarcely had the words fallen from his lips when there was a dull, pistol-like report and the unknown man, staggering, fell to the earth with a moan.

A cry of surprise burst from Mabel's lips.

Old Sol spoke to his horse, and the man and the maiden rode on as though nothing had happened.

Mabel was silent, dumfounded. Old Pegleg was cool, calm and indifferent. When the girl at length had recovered her power of speech, she asked:

"Sol, was it you that shot that outlaw?"

"Why do you ax that, little gal?"

"Because I saw a little tongue of flame shoot out from near your horse's shoulder, though I did not see you draw a weapon."

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed Old Sol, "I jist kicked the feller in the face with this ere game foot o' mine. I'm an ole speckled giraffe on a kick 'ith that wooden peg, and outlaws want to stand aside. I reckon that war one o' your friends lookin' for you and this string o' ponies back here, but the more he looks the longer he'll hunt now. I'm no winged cherub, gal, when it comes to work like this on hand, and I amble right in without ceremony—don't say 'good-evening,' nor tip my hat every time I meet an outlaw on this 'ere prairie. But, look, gal, isn't that sky growin' rosy red with ther quiverin' bars o' mornin' light—wooh! I'm growin' poeticish, now, aren't I?"

Mabel smiled at the whimsical remarks of the

brave old man, whose bare, bristling head and serio-comic features, as now seen in the morning dawn, were in keeping with his reckless, rollicking and daring spirit.

They rode on until the dawn ushered in the new day and just as the sun peeped up over the rim of the horizon, the old man pointed ahead, saying:

"Gal, d've see the top of that grove yander? That's on Willer Island, and there I 'spect to find our friends."

"Oh, I hope you may not be disappointed," Mabel responded.

"Ab! there's some one now, by the shelalah o' St. Peter! an' it are that big boy, Stonewall Bob, or I'm a wild—yes, and there comes another—two more—four more—five in all, or may I be impaled on a sunbeam. Yoop! hoo-raw!"

The old man waved his hand above his head. Stonewall Bob and his friends, who had just come over from the island flushed with a grand victory over the outlaws and savages, who, through the treachery of Cougar Bill, had endeavored to surprise them, had previously discovered the two horsemen and long line of horses moving like a snake out of the western shadows, but not until Old Sol's voice had reached their ears did Stonewall and Ben Clark recognize him.

The joy of the amateurs was unbounded, for they had mourned Pegleg as dead since the discovery of Yellowstone Bill's infamous treachery.

In a few moments the old man and the maiden rode up to where the five men were standing, and then it was that the morning rung with shouts of joy.

Ben Clark assisted Mabel from her pony and embraced her, his heart overflowing with happiness.

"Bless your old soul, Pegleg Sol," Bob exclaimed, "your coming's like one from the grave."

"No; why, bless your infantile heart, Stonewall Bobby," Old Pegleg responded, "I'm here as I agreed to be to he'p you hunt for a Hidden Golden Cache. But, boys, I've been in some trouble, and so've you, and I rejoice, oh, exceedingly great, to find you all safe."

"How did you learn of our dangers?" asked Bob.

"Heard Cougar Bill plan the hull scheme to trap ye with a lot o' dead men on a floatin' raft. I war harnessed up a pris'ner in the outlaw camp at the time. Cougar Bill war your guide, Yallerstun Bill."

"The infernal, treacherous old liar!" exclaimed Stonewall; "he paid dearly for all with his life. I got onto the dead-men-raft trick in time to surprise them, and there were not many that escaped."

"Bully for St. Peter's club!" shouted Old Pegleg; "if it hadn't been for wantin' to rescue Maple, there, I'd got 'round here before that raft, maybe; but I had sich a glorious chance to save her that I couldn't resist the temptation; besides, one gal's worth more'n five boys, my way o' figgerin'. I also brought along most o' the outlaws' horses, as you see; but if you think it war wrong—think I'm a bare-headed thief, I'll take 'em back and ax their pardon."

"What a divine conscience you've got, Pegleg," said Stonewall, "you'd ought to have been a missionary. But I don't think I'd take the ponies back yet awhile, at any rate."

In the mean time Mabel had told her brave young lover of her abduction by Archibald Vandyke, the pursuit of her father, his capture and trials, their escape by the help of Zadok, the hunter and their recapture by the Indians. And now that she was safe for the time being, the fate of her father grieved her more than ever. But she soon received the assurance of the party that all within their power would be done to rescue her parent if he were living.

Some time was spent by the party discussing the situation, and they had finally concluded to return to the island when Stonewall Bob espied a horseman up the valley of the South Fork moving westward at a swinging gallop. Taking Payne's spy-glass—an indispensable thing to an amateur hunter—the young man scanned the horseman closely, then said:

"By the roarin' rivers! there goes a horseman carryin' some one in his arms and I'll swear I believe it a woman. Pegleg, peel your eyes in that direction."

Old Sol took the glass and scanned the object. "You're right, kid, thar's more deviltry goin' on," the old man declared, "but whar the deuce and ace do they git their weemin? It seems no trouble for a red-mouthed outlaw to git hold o' a gal, but I've lived nighly sixty years and haven't got a sign o' a woman yit."

"Friends, take Miss Thurston back to the isl-

and, for I'm goin' to foller that feller to Vancouver's Island but what I know who he is and what he is totin' off. I'm goin' to cut for the hills and head him off before he reaches the mountain foot-hills."

"None o' yer dod-gasted rashness, now, kid," said Old Sol; "I'm goin' to boss this gang and I want you to go slow."

"Boys," said Stonewall Bob, leaping into the saddle on the back of his own trusty pony, "I may be back soon—mebby not for a day or two, or a week, or maybe never; if the latter, trust in Old Pegleg and he'll pull you through, though you needn't believe everything he tells you, for he ornaments, frescoes and fringes his stories very elaborately. As to that buried treasure, use your own pleasure about making the search."

"Bob," said Frank Payne, "we all join in wishing you success and a safe return. We shall wait for you here."

"Then good-by, boys," and the young plainsman galloped away toward the southwest.

"God bless his big heart," said Old Pegleg, "his likes never paced the plains o' Dakota. A Boy Trojan he is, indeed, and when it comes to the defense o' right, honor, man and womanhood he's as unyieldin' as the rocks o' ages—

"A livin' wall, a human wood,"

as the poic says."

CHAPTER XI.

VANDYKE MAKES FOR THE MOUNTAINS.

AFTER Black Bluford and Arch Vandyke had assisted in the construction of the raft, and had seen it and its murderous crew off for Willow Island, they returned to camp to find Mexy Dan and his two companions lying dead, and Old Pegleg Sol and Mabel Thurston gone.

The fury of the outlaws knew no bounds. Vandyke raved like a maniac over the loss of his captive, and in the midst of his fury two persons entered the camp. One of these was readily recognized as Singing-Bird, the daughter of Black Wolf, the Sioux chief, whose camp was temporarily located a few miles away up the North Fork. She was a bright, comely girl of perhaps seventeen, with dark, luminous eyes and a sylph-like form. She was arrayed in all the characteristic gorgeousness of an Indian princess. Jewels flashed in the meshes of her raven tresses, and upon her neck, arms and ankles.

Singing-Bird's companion was also a woman, and, judging by her dress, was a white woman. Her face was veiled and her form enveloped in a long, dark cloak, under which she kept her hands concealed.

At sight of them Black Bluford started, and turning to Vandyke, and pointing to the woman, exclaimed:

"Ah! that explains it all!"

"Singing-Bird!" cried Vandyke, turning upon the woman like a mad demon, "tell me, fair daughter of the great Black Wolf, did you and your companion release the man and maiden that were prisoners here? Do you know who slew these men?"

The princess shrunk back with alarm before the glaring eyes of the outlaw, saying, in a timid voice:

"Singing-Bird and her pale-face friend have just come."

"I believe you lie!" was the brutal Vandyke's reply.

In an instant the black eyes of the insulted girl flashed with the fire of resentment, and with all the scorn that she could throw into her face and voice, she retorted:

"Singing-Bird's tongue is straight, but she is a weak girl. She would not tell a falsehood like the pale-face she talks to now, as he did when he came to Black Wolf's camp and tried to win Singing-Bird's heart."

"Confound your little savage heart! it isn't worth winning," thundered Vandyke—"not even worth breaking. But who is that woman with you, Singing-Bird?"

"She will speak for herself," answered the princess.

"Archibald Vandyke, you know me!" cried the woman, throwing aside her veil and revealing the haggard face of a white woman—a face upon which was written a look of deadly passion; "it is your wife, the woman whose life and happiness you have wrecked and trampled upon, and I am here to make sure that no other woman's life and honor be destroyed at your hands!"

As the last word fell from her lips she thrust out her arm toward Vandyke—a derringer in her hand rung out and the villain, staggering back, fell to the ground. The next instant—before a hand could stay the blow—the mad aveng-

eress plunged a dagger into her own heart and fell dead.

With a cry of terror Singing-Bird fell upon her knees at the side of the pale-face woman, drew the dagger from her breast, and began a weird, mournful wailing over her.

Unfortunately, the poor deluded woman's shot intended to end a wicked career had failed to do its work. The bullet only grazed Vandyke's head, stunning him, and in a few minutes he had recovered his senses and was upon his feet, a perfect demon of fury. It was all Black Bluford could do to keep him from slaying the princess, Singing-Bird, and when the frightened girl turned to leave the camp in fear of her life, the outlaw seized her by the arm, saying:

"No, no, Miss Ingin, you can't go, you black, spiteful vixen, you! You shall bear the burden of this tragedy, for it was you, and no one else, that guided that poor deluded woman here to slay me, and finding old Sol, and that girl Mabel Thurston here, released them, and so the death of them three men is upon your head. You needn't fight, Miss Wildcat, for I'm boss of the situation now. You have seen the day and hour that you could command me, Ingin that you are, but, by the gods, that day has passed. I propose now to make you mine, anyhow, and when I am tired of you, you can stick a dagger into your heart. Captain," and the villain turned to Black Bluford, "I shall tarry here no longer. Get the hidden treasure if you can, but as for me, I shall at once start for the hills with a red bride, long as I can't have a white one. To help your cause, tell old Black Wolf that the pale-faces at Willow Island stole the girl, and if the expedition now on the way to the Island fails, the old chief will hurl his whole tribe against them."

"That'll be a good scheme if the chief doesn't get hold of the truth of matters," replied the outlaw chief.

"That he never will, captain, for I would be the sufferer," Vandyke continued; "if you will bury that woman there, I will pull out for the West at once—before any of the Ingins with that expedition return. I guess I'll tie my lady's claws, and then bring up my horse and sail."

So saying, the villain, with the assistance of Black Bluford, bound Singing-Bird's arms and ankles, and then mounting his horse, which was one of the few left by Old Pegleg, he took the captive in his arms and rode out of the grove and up the valley toward the west.

The dusky little princess did not give up without a struggle, and she plied her teeth to her captor's arm with so little mercy that more than once the villain cried out with pain.

With his early start and well-rested horse, Vandyke had hoped to reach the hills unseen or unmolested by any one in the vicinity of the Forks.

A bend in the valley soon concealed him from view of his friend, Black Bluford, who was exceedingly anxious for his escape. The outlaw chief saw that if the expedition sent to the island failed, he could enlist the whole of Black Wolf's followers against the formidably-intrenched hunters by charging Singing-Bird's absence to them. He was fully aware that the Indians acting with them that night were doing so without the chief's orders. They were warriors who, returning from the slaughter of the buffaloes, had espied the three fugitives, Stonewall Bob, Mr. Thurston and his daughter, and had given chase. The death of one of their number fired the others to a spirit of revenge, and this led to other conflicts that had cost the red-skins dearly.

But Vandyke had been gone scarcely half an hour when three outlaws and five Indians came back to camp with the startling news of the failure of the expedition to the island, and the dreadful loss of life, Cougar Bill being one of the very first slain by the indomitable defenders of Willow Island.

Black Bluford received this news in evident surprise and sorrow. He appeared to become discouraged, and would have departed at once for the hills had he not placed great hope in the scheme of inciting the Indians to the destruction of the white hunters, and thereby secure the secret of the buried gold and the treasure itself.

After a few moments' calm reflection, he turned to the Indians and said:

"Warriors, go hasten to your camp and tell your chief, Black Wolf, that his daughter, Singing-Bird, is a captive in the hands of the pale-face hunters. While we were away from here building that raft the cunning whites came and slew those three men, released the captive maiden and the captive hunter. Tell him to bring all his braves, for the white hunters are great fighters."

Without further words the Indians departed in haste while the outlaws proceeded to bury their comrades—a duty Black Bluford had performed for the dead white woman before the arrival of his friends, concealing her grave back in the grove.

The loss of the outlaws had been great. Over half of their number had been slain, but the survivors concluded that in their great loss of friends there would be some gain in the division of the buried gold should they succeed in getting it. To them plunder was more than human life.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TIDE BEGINS TO TURN.

THE hours wore slowly away. Noon came and the sun had been on his downward course some time when the chief, Black Wolf, and a hundred mounted warriors came thundering down the valley of the North Fork and joined the decimated ranks of the outlaws at their camp in the grove.

Here the chief was given a rehearsal of the falsehood calculated to fire his savage breast with deeds of vengeance.

The outlaw asserted positively that Singing-Bird was in the hands of the white hunters, and so excited and alarmed the chief over the fate of his child that he seemed almost crazed.

Straightway the Sioux led his warriors down the river, accompanied by Black Bluford, and laid siege to Willow Island. But a few random shots, however, had been exchanged between the shore and island, when the attention of the Indians was attracted to two horsemen and a footman coming down the valley from the west at a leisurely walk.

Operations against the island were suspended for the time being, and the approach of the trio awaited in suspense.

That one of the horsemen and the footman were white men the savages had no doubt, but the other appeared to be a woman, and an Indian at that.

Black Bluford watched their approach with a look of alarm upon his face, for he recognized the horse one of them rode as that which Vandyke had ridden away from the grove.

In a short time the party came close enough for the outlaw to recognize all of them; one was Stonewall Bob, another the princess, Singing-Bird, and the third—the man on foot—was Archibald Vandyke! The latter's hands were tied at his back and one end of a lariat was fastened around his neck and the other made fast to Stonewall's saddle, and in this way the villain was led along like a haltered ox.

As soon as the savages recognized the Boy Trojan and the princess they advanced to meet them. A low, vindictive murmur passed from lip to lip, and nearly every hand sought a weapon.

In a few moments the three were surrounded by the savages. A stern look of triumph was upon the face of Stonewall Bob. Singing-Bird's face was aglow with joy, while that of the scoundrel Vandyke was a sight to behold. It looked as if he had been in the clutches of a grizzly. It was one solid mass of cuts and scratches from which the blood had poured down upon his breast. One eye was swollen shut and overhung with a great blubber of puffed-up flesh.

The moment she drew rein Singing-Bird leaped from her saddle and was embraced by her father.

Stonewall Bob remained in his saddle glancing around him, regarding the murderous eyes focused upon him with as cool, calm smile as though the red-skins looked upon him with admiration. He heeded not the warriors' jeers and taunts hurled at him, nor did he move a muscle, nor betray a single fear when a savage, here and there in the crowd, drew a tomahawk as if to throw, or raised a gun as if to fire at him.

Singing-Bird quickly spoke a few words to her father in a low tone, when the chief hastily turned and ran his eyes over the assembled throng, his action betraying surprise and indignation. His eyes finally came to a rest on Black Bluford, who had just mounted his horse and started away at a gallop, fully cognizant of the storm gathering around him.

"Stop him! stop him! shoot him!" shouted Black Wolf, at the top of his lungs, his face the very picture of rage.

Instantly the whole band of warriors turned and sped after the outlaw. Those on the outside of the crowd began firing upon him, and the whistling bullets told the villain that the tide had turned against him—that the storm had burst upon him, and that his only hope for life now lay in the heels of his horse.

Stonewall Bob, still seated upon his horse,

heard the chief's command to shoot, and, seeing the ineffective work of the excited red-skins, he quickly raised his long-range rifle, glanced along the barrel and pressed the trigger.

A yell of triumph greeted the shot, for the horse of the fleeing outlaw sunk to the earth with a broken shoulder, and before Black Bluford could extricate himself from the wreck, as it were, the savages were upon him. But Black Bluford was not a coward. He resolved to sell his life dearly as possible and fought the warriors with a fearful desperation, many of them biting the dust before he was overpowered and disarmed.

Black Wolf and his daughter turned to Stonewall Bob and complimented him on his shot in a very extravagant flow of Indian language. Then he was invited to dismount and be seated on a blanket spread by the chief on the ground. This he did, the chief seating himself before him on the same blanket, while the princess held the young Trojan's horse and looked in silent admiration.

Stonewall Bob knew enough of Indian customs to know that to be invited to a seat on the same blanket with the chief, and for one of the royal household to hold the horse of a guest, were among the highest honors that could be paid to a white friend; and so the Boy Trojan found himself a hero among his late enemies.

Of course, he knew it all came of his having rescued Singing-Bird from the power of the villain who stood but a few feet away regarding the scene with the feeling of one whose feet already stood on the scaffold.

The warriors now gathered around the chief and Stonewall Bob. They saw that their leader was conferring honors upon the pale-face and they at once assumed an attitude that showed a respect for the wishes of their chief.

Black Wolf could speak English fairly. With the characteristic promptness of the Indian to bestow titles of honor upon those who have performed deeds of valor, he at once dubbed Bob White-Buffalo-Calf, much to the amusement of the young plainsman.

Nothing would do the chief but that Bob must narrate the manner in which he had rescued Singing-Bird, and to show an appreciation of the honor conferred upon him, the boy began:

"When the night had passed and White-Buffalo-Calf had come over from yonder island with his friends, he saw a horseman galloping westward with a captive in his arms. White-Buffalo-Calf knew that something was wrong, and he mounted his pony and rode away in pursuit of the bad man. He did not expect to catch him so soon, but his captive, the fair daughter of the chief, had managed to slip her little hands from her bonds, and then she did not hesitate, brave little lady that she was, to show the mettle of the Black Wolves, and forthwith she plied the nails of her little fingers on the face of her captor as the glossy catamount plies his pearly talons in the flesh of the tender fawn. She made it so extremely lively for her captor, as you can see by his lacerated face, that he had to dismount to rebind her hands. On the ground she gave him another round, and made the bark fly like sixty-seven. Before the bad man had succeeded in binding her, White-Buffalo-Calf charged down upon him like a whole herd of young bisons, gave him a left-hander over the right eye that knocked him out of plumb, and then the work was done, and with Singing-Bird and the bad man I returned here."

Black Wolf must have understood, in substance, if not in detail, Stonewall's lavishly-told story, for he smiled in a very satisfied way, and said:

"The White-Buffalo-Calf is a great brave! Singing-Bird herself has said so, and she is the daughter of Black Wolf, the great Sioux chief."

"That makes it so, for the chief is a great warrior," responded Bob, determined not to be outdone in fulsome flattery, at the same time secretly wishing that his friends at the island could see him and hear him "ladle out taffy" to the conceited old chief and the gaping warriors around him.

The conversation between the two—the boy and the chief—lasted for some time, and during the whole of it the princess stood by, feasting her dark eyes upon the face of her rescuer with a profound look of admiration that produced a burning envy in the breasts of many young warriors who would have given their right arms for Singing-Bird's approving smile.

Meanwhile, those at the island were not ignorant of the arrival of Stonewall Bob among the Indians, but they were entirely ignorant of what was going on. They had seen the excited demonstrations of the warriors at the time of

Black Bluford's capture, but were unable to decide its meaning, and it was with a feeling of dire suspense that they awaited the result of the conference on the plain.

At length their patience was rewarded by seeing Stonewall Bob, Black Wolf and the princess, Singing-Bird, come out from the crowd of warriors and walk slowly across the valley toward the island. When they had reached the shore they heard the Boy Trojan shout forth in stentorian voice:

"Hul-loa! over there, friends!"

Old Pegleg Sol quickly stepped into view from the bushes and shouted back:

"Here we are, Bobby, you renegade you! Do you come to demand our surrender?"

"Bring over that raft and take us to the island," replied Bob; "everything is now on a peace footing, and brotherly love reigns supremely supreme. Come over with your gondola."

Ben Clark at once stepped aboard the raft and pushed ashore, took Bob, the chief and the princess on, and returned to the island, where the Boy Trojan was received with joy.

Bob introduced the chief and his daughter to his friends. Mabel and the princess at once entered into a conversation. Singing-Bird spoke English fluently. She had learned the language of the poor white woman who had taken her own life in the outlaw camp, for she had lived with the Indians for over a year and had been an intimate friend of the princess.

Bob narrated to his friends the means by which friendly relations had been brought about with the Indians, and in this good news the whole party rejoiced, for they had all had enough of Indian and outlaw fighting. The chief did not hold them amenable for the death of those warriors slain in the attacks on White-Buffalo-Calf and the island, for they acted contrary to his orders or wishes.

From the princess, Singing-Bird, Mabel learned that there was a white man a prisoner in their camp. He had been brought there a few minutes before she and the wronged wife of Vandyke had started to the outlaw camp the night before, and from the description given she knew it was her father, and at once made a personal appeal to the chief for his release.

Black Wolf promised her that her father should be a free man as soon as he returned to camp. In fact, the chief was in a mood to promise most anything desired, so rejoiced was he over the return of his idolized child.

Old Pegleg Sol, who could talk the Sioux language almost perfectly, held a short conference with Black Wolf, which ended in the chief inviting the whole party of whites to go with him and become his guests in his hunting-camp. The old hunter was not ignorant of the characteristic treachery of the American Indian, nor was he ignorant of Black Wolf's deep and undying gratitude to one who had done what the Boy Trojan had for him. So far as the chief was concerned, Bob was safe to go and come among the savages, as were his friends also; but Old Sol was afraid that some of his warriors, who felt little interest in the welfare of the princess, and who had suffered at the hands of the amateurs, might undertake to wreak vengeance upon them in a treacherous way. But, after all, the danger in refusing to accompany the chief to his camp would be fully as great, if not greater than to go, and so, after the matter had been discussed on its merits, the party decided to go with him.

Camp on the island was at once broken; the horses were taken over to the mainland, saddled and bridled; the camp-equipage was rafted ashore and packed upon the two pack-horses.

Then mounting, all rode out to where the savages were in waiting, and at once started for the Indian camp, White-Buffalo-Calf and Black Wolf riding in front, Mabel and Singing-Bird following, the amateur hunters and Old Pegleg following the girls, and the warriors bringing up the rear.

After their recent lively experience with the savages the young amateurs could not suppress a slight mistrust and aversion to the half-nude warriors, yet they succeeded in disguising their feelings quite well.

The two outlaws, Black Bluford and Vandyke, for some unaccountable reason, were taken along as captives. This Stonewall Bob regretted, for he was afraid that their genial host, Black Wolf, proposed to entertain his guests with an exhibition of savage vengeance by roasting the outlaws alive at the stake.

It was almost sunset when the party reached the Indian camp, which presented a picture of life and bustle. The camp was a temporary one. The savages had come down there to lay in their

winter supply of buffalo-meat, and from appearances they had not been idle. Thousands of pounds of meat cut into strips hung around the tents, and to poles set upright in the earth, and upon ropes stretched here and there over acres of ground. The camp was also covered with green robes stretched out and pinned to the ground to dry. Scores of dogs were snarling over the cords of bones thrown aside after the meat had been stripped off. The squaws were all busy at something or other, while the few bucks that remained at camp were lazily strolling around, wrapped in dirty red and green blankets, enjoying an evening pipe.

To the amateurs the scene was decidedly novel and picturesque, but the strong odor of fresh meat mingled with the conglomerated fumes of an Indian camp are not at all suggestive of the intoxicating perfumes of Araby or Ind.

Riding to the center of the camp the party drew rein and the order was given by the chief to dismount.

The amateurs unpacked their ponies which the Indians led away and staked out to grass along with their own.

Mabel was assigned quarters in the lodge of Singing-Bird, and a few minutes later Joshua Thurston was set at liberty and shown into the presence of his child, where a joyous meeting took place between the father and daughter, and also the hunters.

The two outlaws were securely bound hand and foot, and confined in a lodge and a guard set over them.

Soon the story of Singing-Bird's rescue from the power of the "bad pale-face" by Stonewall Bob was heralded through the camp, and warriors, squaws and children came to look upon the valiant young warrior, the mighty Buffalo-Calf.

Among them was a powerful young buck answering to the euphonious name of Bounding-Bear. He was a savage giant, and as villainous-looking fellow as one would meet in a lifetime. But his size and wonderful physical and muscular strength made him an important character in the tribe. He was a great wrestler, and no brave in the tribe, and in fact no two, had ever been able to down the Bounding-Bear. Conscious of his superior strength the fellow did not hesitate to make it felt upon every occasion among his own friends to such an extent that some of the warriors had grown to regard him with disfavor, while others looked upon him as an Indian god possessed of supernatural powers.

At sight of Stonewall Bob, Bounding-Bear expressed his surprise in a manner that seemed to indicate contempt.

He walked up within arm's reach of the Boy Trojan, and looked him over from head to foot, then walked around him and scrutinized him as though he were an animal or some curiosity there for inspection.

Finally coming around in front of Bob again he stopped, straightened up to his full height, and appeared to gaze down upon the young hunter with lofty contempt, his little snakish eyes gleaming like a serpent's over his high, bulging cheek-bones.

"Waugh!" he ejaculated, "heap little big pale-face!"

The Indian's friends that were present applauded his paradoxical observation.

"Lookie here, red-skin," said Old Pegleg, "that 'are boy's just 'bout as mountainous as you be. He may not be so infernal handsome—over the left—as you be, but he's a hull team o' brindle steers."

"Ugh!" ejaculated the Indian, whether he understood Pegleg or not, "me Boundin'-Bear—me wrestle."

"Boundin'-Bear big wrestle," put in a savage standing by.

"Rather a queer reception, isn't it?" asked Frank Payne, in an undertone of Old Pegleg.

"That Ingin," replied the hunter, "is a conceited big cuss that's got it into his head that he's a wild, ragin' war-hoss, and seein' Bob's no little runt, I reckon he thinks he'll take the conceit outen the boy right now so's he'll know what posish he occupies among the whales and giants o' this 'ere camp."

"He must be a powerful Indian," said Payne.

"He could prob'ly fling you and me around easy enough," continued the old hunter, "but he's a big, lazy, over-fed critter that our Bob, I b'lieve, could soon outwind and flummix."

"I'm not much on a wrestle," said Stonewall in reply to the savage giant, "but when it comes to standin' up and knockin', I'm medium."

"Me wrestle," was the Indian's reply, and he began sidling up toward Bob as if to take hold of him.

"Bobby," said Old Pegleg, "that noble red-

man seems determined to know which o' you dainty little heletropes are the gamest on a wrestle. If you could stand him on his head a time 'r two he'd keep 'way from you."

"Take my weapons," said Bob, "and I'll give the lark a twister for luck. Now, look here, red-skin,"—turning to Bounding-Bear—"if you're such a star-eyed cyclone on a wrestle, why, pile me up easy."

The Indians present, seeing that the boy giant was actually going to wrestle with the great Bounding-Bear, became so excited that the whole camp was drawn, as if by magic, around the contestants, Black Wolf being in the crowd.

Stonewall's friends entertained no little anxiety for his success, but they permitted no look or act to betray their feelings. On the other hand the faces of the red-skins wore a satisfied smile which seemed to anticipate the triumph of Bounding-Bear.

The two wrestlers grappled and the contest began. In size they were well matched, and it soon became apparent to the red-skins that their champion had met his match.

For several minutes they maneuvered for an advantage, the Indian exerting himself at times to his utmost. Stonewall seemed content to stand on guard and let the red-skin do the work until a favorable opportunity was offered, when he suddenly threw all his strength into a single effort and endeavored to bring down his man; but the wary, athletic red-skin was on the alert, and while the Boy Trojan succeeded in throwing the Indian, the latter got in his work, and the two went down together.

As neither could claim the fall the contest was renewed. As before, Stonewall Bob allowed the Indian to do the work. This continued for several minutes, when suddenly Bounding-Bear's heels flew into the air and the savage landed on the back of his head with such terrific violence that it seemed that his neck must be broken. It was done so quickly that no one save Stonewall Bob knew just how it was done, and for a moment the savages were silent with surprise. Then as the truth of the situation became apparent, there arose a mingled cry of surprise, delight and derision.

But there was more excitement when Bounding-Bear arose to his feet, gazed around him in a bewildered sort of a way, staggered and fell to the ground again.

"By the jumpin' jackals!" exclaimed Old Pegleg, "you've 'bout killed that critter, Bob!"

"I give him the 'Jim river Flirt,'" said Bob, "and I reckon the fellow is confused in his head and weak in the spine."

Bounding-Bear again arose to his feet, and with the help of a friend staggered away, unable to come to time.

"Bobby," said Pegleg, "that gives you the belt and the Ingin the wry neck."

A few minutes later the crowd had dispersed to their lodges, for it was now almost dark, and Stonewall Bob was walking about the camp, in hopes of learning by some means or other the disposition to be made of the outlaws, Black Bluford and Arch Vandyke, when a little figure crept up to him from the shadows of her tent, and looking up into his face with a pleading, anxious look, said:

"White-Buffalo-Calf, beware! Bounding-Bear is a bad Indian, and he will take your life when you see him not."

"Thank you, Singing-Bird," replied Stonewall; "I will heed your kind warning."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EXCITING BUFFALO-CHASE.

As soon as Stonewall Bob reached the ledge assigned to him and his friends he acquainted the latter with Singing-Bird's warning.

"Oho!" exclaimed Old Pegleg, "the little black-eyed, smoked-skinned witch is'n love with you, Bobby; I see'd that to-day the way she fixed her eye with an expirin' look onto you. But then her warnin' is no doubt timely. That Boundin'-Bear are the meanest-lookin' Injun that God ever put breath in, and that 'Jim River Flirt' you give him will call for blood and may after all be the means o' givin' you some trouble."

"I rather think that as soon as we can we had better get away from here," said young Payne.

"I'm not afraid," replied Stonewall, "for the chief and his girl are on our side."

"That may be," said Old Pegleg, "but the chief don't control the actions o' his varmin'ts when out o' his sight; see how they waded in on you fellows at Willow Island. To be sure, we needn't tear ourselves away, but then I can see nothin' to detain us here longer than to-night."

"But maybe Stonewall can," suggested Ben Clark.

"If Bob's in love 'ith that princess," said Pegleg, "why thar's no salvation for him, for I don't believe this camp'll hold him and Boundin'-Bear both very long."

"Oh, git away with your lover-clatter," retorted Stonewall, "I'm up here in search of buried treasure, and suppose, Payne, you show Pegleg that convict's map and see what he knows about it, or rather the location described."

"All right," responded Payne, producing the paper and unfolding it, "here now, is the document that has come so near costing us all our lives."

In the light of a sputtering fat-lamp Old Pegleg and Stonewall Bob closely examined the map, and after this had been done, and even before the explanatory notes had been read, the old borderman exclaimed:

"Humph! I know *exactly* where Captain Mercer and his men were killed. I passed over the ground a few months afterward and saw skeletons lying there, but I supposed they were savages that had been butcherin' one and another and thought no more 'bout it. But go on, Bobby, and read them 'are notes."

Stonewall Bob read the notes as written by the convict, Goven.

"Exactly," Pegleg said, after the young Trojan had finished; "but I observe thar'll be one diffikilty in makin' the search for the treasure and in gittin' away with it all if we find it where Mercer left it."

"Why so?"

"The Ingins 'll want a share o' it."

"They need not know anything about it."

"Yes; but we can't keep it from 'em, if we find it, for this very Ingin camp covers the spot whar that gold is or was buried, if I'm not awfully mistaken; and I don't think thar's a man in America or anywheres else that knows these Grand river valleys as well as I do, 'ceptin', o' course, the Man who made them."

"How long do you think the Indians will remain here?"

"All fall, or until the huntin' season's over with, unless they've good luck in baggin' all the game they want sooner."

"Well, I can't stay here that long," said Payne.

"We can examine the grounds and locate the Hidden Cache, at any rate," observed young Renshaw; "and then, if we have to come back, or send one or two of our party back, all there will be to do will be to dig up the gold and carry it home."

"Stonewall Bobby 'll be comin' up this way, no doubt," said Pegleg, "for I know he's all mashed up on that princess, and he can git the treasure if thar be any."

"Yes, 'if' there be any," repeated young Lockwood; this has seemed like a wild-goose chase to me all the time. I'm half inclined to think that dying-convict story was the offspring of a diseased mind; but gold or no gold, we're having lots of healthy exciting amusement."

Thus the conversation ran on until late into the night, when the party all lay down to rest except Pegleg, who concluded he would watch the movements of the Indians for awhile, at least. Aside from Bounding-Bear and his especial friends, he had no fears of treachery on the part of the red-skins; his object in watching was to ascertain, if possible, the disposition made of the two outlaw prisoners. He felt certain they would be disposed of during that night, some way or other.

Barking dogs and howling coyotes, however, were the only sounds that disturbed the night; but the coming of day brought wild excitement to the camp when it was discovered that Black Bluford and Arch Vandyke had escaped from their prison-lodge!

The chief was greatly exasperated, and but for the fact that the warrior who had been left to guard the outlaws was found unconscious and almost dead, it is likely his life would have paid the penalty of the prisoners' escape.

That the outlaws had help, of course, there was no question, but with Old Pegleg and Stonewall there was a question as to whether that help came from outside or within the camp.

"It's my humble opinion," said Stonewall to his friends, "that them outlaws have friends in this very camp."

"No doubt o' it, Bobby; them villains and these Ingins have been friends too long to break off all at once," declared Old Pegleg Sol; "I don't think the chief has had one thing to do with their escape, but that infernal big Boundin'-Bear is the chap I'd suspect."

"I see he's got a wry neck this morning," said Payne, "and has to turn his whole body when he looks around. I wonder if he feels like a 'heap, big wrestle' this morning?"

The whites took breakfast with Black Wolf that morning, adding from their own supplies to the matutinal meal coffee and sugar, of which the chief was passionately fond.

Scarcely had their repast been finished, when an Indian scout came hurrying into camp with the news that an immense herd of buffaloes was feeding in the valley some five or six miles away.

Like wildfire the news spread through the camp, and the red hunters at once began preparations for the chase. Old Black Wolf invited his white guests to join them, and to please the chief, as well as gratify their own desires for a grand buffalo-hunt, they accepted the invitation.

In less than ten minutes more than a hundred Indians were upon their ponies ready to start. Black Wolf took the lead with his white friends at his side, and then all rode away toward the northwest.

Mabel and her father remained in camp, which was left in charge of a few warriors who were unable to go on the chase. Bounding-Bear was one of those who remained behind, his stiff neck being an ample excuse for not going; but no sooner were the others out of sight than he armed himself, mounted his pony and struck out up the valley evidently bent upon mischief of some kind.

The hunters soon left the valley and took to the hills to enable them to approach as close as possible to the herd unseen, and it was nearly noon before the chief had got his men posted ready for the charge. The best position he reserved for the white hunters, and when, at length, all was ready, the signal was given, and over a hundred horsemen burst from the hills and went thundering down upon the mighty herd of buffaloes.

In an instant the game took alarm and started. At first the hunters could hear a low, sullen noise that gradually deepened into a roll like that of thunder.

To the amateur hunters the scene was beyond their comprehension, and the excitement it engendered in their breasts was of the most thrilling character. With their eyes fixed upon the mighty herd sweeping away before them, themselves gliding along at a rapid speed, the very earth seemed slipping away in their front—rushing on like the black waters of a mad, roaring sea.

Among the very foremost in the chase were Old Pegleg Sol. Cripple that he was he was nevertheless a fine horseman, and with his weight resting in the one stirrup and his wooden "peg" pointing out almost at right-angles with his body, he urged on his horse, carbine in hand, and was the first of all to fire a weapon, the shot bringing down a fine, fat cow.

The old hunter's shot seemed a signal for the slaughter to begin, and the crash of rifles and bark of revolvers were at once heard on either side along the line.

The amateurs soon recovering from the "buck fever" that the thrilling scene had given them entered into the wild, wanton sport with the zest of old hunters. Being excellent horsemen and fine marksmen they made nearly every shot from their heavy navy revolvers count a dead or wounded buffalo.

And on, close upon the heels of the herd, rode the red and white destroyers. The noble game went down by the score, and the trail behind was left dotted with carcasses. Here and there lay a great bull or a sleek cow thrashing the earth in death agonies. A few able to walk, but mortally wounded, were slowly staggering off toward the hills to die in seclusion and be devoured by the myriads of coyotes that could already be seen hovering off on the summit of the bluffs.

The horses and ponies ridden by the whites were animals of superior strength and speed, and when, after a few miles' chase more than two-thirds of the Indians had dropped out, every one of the white hunters was still at the front showing no signs of fatigue. And finally, when every red-skin had given up the chase, the whites were all pressing on after the buffaloes, and they kept on until their cartridges began to give out. Ben Clark and young Renshaw were the first to draw rein. Lockwood soon followed, but the inimitable Old Pegleg, the redoubtable Stonewall Bob and the dashing young amateur, Frank Payne, pressed on, finally drawing up five miles beyond where their friends had given up the chase.

Dismounting to rest their panting horses the three men threw themselves upon the ground, Old Pegleg saying to Payne:

"Boy, wasn't that a rustler, though?"

"Well, I should say it was a grand buffalo chase a' any rate," replied Payne; "but is it possible that we three are the last to give it up?"

"Yes," answered Stonewall; "the last Ingin dropped out several miles back, and our three white boys must be back fully five or six miles. We've chased the buffaloes over ten miles."

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Payne, "it don't seem to me to be more than three. Boys, after all this is barbarous—wanton destruction of the noblest of game."

"Boy," said Old Pegleg, "you're mistaken thar. A true hunter never *deestroys* game for the mere fun o' killin' it. Them Ingins 'll skin every one we've killed and lug the meat to camp and jerk it for winter use. It are only pale-faces that reds kill for the fun o' it. Bobby, thar, has an indirect interest in this hunt, for, this winter, when he goes a-courtin' o' Singin'-Bird in the Ingins' big nest, he'll set cross-legged on old Black Wolf's dirty blanket, and, like a fox hound, gnaw jerked buffalo till his eyes bu'g out. Bobby's a goner, and a year hence an eagle-feather 'll adorn his head, and a red blanket with the *totem* o' a Buffalo-Calf onto it, and a greasy loin-clout will be all that the noble white buck—the Boy Trojan—will wear."

"Say, Pegleg," put in Stonewall, "suppose you let up on me and that Ingin girl and give your attention to that outfit coming yonder."

He pointed south toward the river, from which direction five horsemen were approaching at a rapid pace.

"By the rampin' tigers o' Bengal!" exclaimed the old hunter, "thar's that big Ingin, Bouncin'-Bear, at the head o' that squad, and, as I live, them two fellers next himself are Black Bluford and Arch Vandyke!"

"You're right, Pegleg," affirmed Stonewall, "and they're after our hair. You can see now who liberated them outlaws. That fall I gave Bounding-Bear—that 'Jim River Flirt' is the cause of all of it. Boys, we've a fight on hand—two outlaws and three Ingins, and I guess we can attend to that, can't we?"

"I should think so," replied Payne; "but what has possessed them to make an open attack on us here?"

"It's all clear to me as crystal ice," replied Pegleg; "in a hunt o' this kind men allers pursue the buffaloes till the last cartridge or shot is expended. No one knows that better than that big Ingin. They think we are outen shootin' stuff."

"There's where they're goin' to cork themselves," declared Stonewall, "for I've no less than six cartridges in my carbine this minute, and some of them will be in the carcasses of them imps o' Satan inside the next two minutes."

As he spoke the young hunter sprang to his feet and took his carbine from his saddle.

"And I've a few shots left," said Payne, procuring his weapon.

"And you can bet Old Pegleg's got one or two on hand yit," said the old hunter, hopping about like a crow; "I never use the last shot till I have to. I done that trick onc't and it cost me a leg, and so I know more'n I did, even if I arn't so beauchiful and festiverous. But, boys, hold your fire, and when ye shoot, swat 'em in the bowels and see 'em curl up and squeal. They think our show of fight is a bluff, but— There, boys, they're pullin' rein to shoot—let 'em have it in the'r digestion."

Quick as a thought almost, the three hunters raised their weapons and fired, and both Black Bluford and Vandyke tumbled from their horses. A second discharge brought down a red-skin.

Taken by surprise, the cowardly Bounding-Bear whirled his pony, and lying forward upon its neck sought safety in flight, his surviving friend following him.

Several shots were fired at the fleeing wretches, but despite the skill of the hunters as riflemen, they escaped apparently unharmed.

"Thunder and Mars! what next?" was the exclamation that burst from Frank Payne's lips.

"Go over and kick them dead outlaws," said Pegleg; "oh, but if ever live beauties ever foolished themselves it war that five. If we'd been outen shootin'-fodder, they could 'a' picked us off at pleasure, 'less we could 'a' outrid 'em. But now we know what we're to expect from Bouncin'-Bear, and I reckon Bobby's got to harvest him in afore he'll be safe in the arms o' his smoky-skinned bride."

"Lay this matter before the chief," said Payne; "why not?"

"No, I'll say nothing to him," responded Stonewall, "for fear we might get into trouble with the warriors before Mabel Thurston is safe. For her sake I'll keep quiet and watch my chances to defeat that Ingin giant in his treacherous work."

So conversing, the trio walked out to where

the two outlaws lay—Black Bluford dead, and the villain Vandyke writhing in his death-throes.

"Hullo here, ole sinner!" exclaimed Old Pegleg, "so you're down at last, ar'n't ye?"

Vandyke looked up, and although the death-glaze was dimming his eyes, he recognized the trio, and, game to the last, he felt around in the grass for his revolver, muttering an oath.

"It's no use, Vandyke," said Stonewall, "you've got to give it up, and what a miserable end it is, too, when you could as well lived and died like a man. You might have lived awhile longer had you not followed that Ingin, Bounding-Bear, out here to slay us."

"He said—he said you were out of ammunition," the dying man gasped with a great effort that seemed to rend him with pain.

"Yes, but we don't hunt buffalo like Ingins," put in Pegleg; "we alers keep a few shots back for grizzlies and outlaws."

"Bounding-Bear released us," the villain went on in a delirious sort of way, "and he said you were out of ammunition—out of ammunition—there it is, captain—the buried gold! I heard him tell Mabel all about it—we'll get it all, Bluford—all of it—and then—"

"He's delirious now," said Payne, "and can't live but a few moments."

And he spoke the truth, for the outlaw soon breathed his last.

Mounting their horses the trio began retracing their steps. They rejoined their three friends, and as they all continued on, they related their adventures with the outlaws and the revengeful Bounding-Bear and his friends.

The trail over which the buffaloes passed now presented a busy scene. The Indians were engaged in skinning the game and cutting it up for transportation to camp. Squaws, with pack-ponies, had followed up the hunters, and were carrying the meat back to camp, and not a few of the women were carrying upon their own backs slavish loads of the dripping meat.

Black Wolf, the chief, awaited the return of his white friends, and received them with savage blandishment. He congratulated them upon their skill as hunters, and gave them the credit of killing many buffaloes.

The day was well advanced when the party reached camp, where they were welcomed with joy, especially by Singing-Bird, Mabel Thurston and her father.

The white hunters were tired and hungry. The day's sport had surpassed even the vivid dreams of the amateurs. They had entered into the full enjoyment and excitement of the chase, and one of their greatest hopes had been realized. The other, now, was to secure the buried treasure of the fur-trader, and they would be ready to depart in the enjoyment of all they had sought in the Grand River valleys.

A supper of broiled meat, hot coffee and Indian bread was partaken of that evening by the whites, and with a gusto that can be realized only by those who have undergone a like experience and pleasure.

After supper the white hunters sought their lodge to talk over the day's work and their future course. The conduct of Bounding-Bear was the only thing that they now had to give them any uneasiness. The fellow had not returned to the camp yet, and Pegleg thought he and his few friends might not, as long as they—the whites—remained there, through fear of incurring the chief's ire for the attempted killing of Stonewall and his friends that day.

While the party was discussing the situation, who should enter the lodge but Singing-Bird? She was gaudily arrayed in all her finest paraphernalia. A smile was upon her face and a light of joy in her eyes, and there was not a man in the party but what admitted to himself that she was a beautiful girl, Indian though she were.

Upon her arms and in her hands she carried a pair of moccasins and leggins that were beautifully wrought in various-colored beads, and advancing to Stonewall Bob, she laid them at his feet, saying:

"The White-Buffalo-Calf is a brave pale-face. He saved the life and honor of Singing-Bird, the daughter of the great chief, Black Wolf, and Singing-Bird brings these things for the pale-face brave as a token of her thanks."

Stonewall Bob was both surprised and confused by this unexpected reward of merit from this simple-hearted Indian girl; but mastering himself, he took up the presents and holding them in his hands, replied:

"Singing-Bird, daughter of the great chief, Black Wolf, I thank you for these beautiful presents and the kind words you speak. White-Buffalo-Calf is proud to know that he saved the life of the fair Singing-Bird from the clutches of the white vulture. He will always remember

her, and when I wear these beautiful moccasins and leggins I know I shall be inspired to deeds of bravery and heroism by a remembrance of their fair donor."

With a smile of joy the maiden turned and left the lodge, while Old Pegleg, with mock solemnity, broke the silence, saying:

"White-Buffalo-Calf has spoken, and the sound of his voice war like the gurgle o' molasses in January. Oh, my!"

An outburst of laughter was indulged in at Stonewall's expense.

Meanwhile Stonewall sat quietly examining his presents, his face aglow with a smile of delight.

"I see'd that gal and four other squaws war busy this mornin'," Pegleg went on; "but I s'posed they war goin' to make a fancy blanket outen them as what are leggins now; and when I see'd the foundation o' them moccasins, I s'posed they war goin' to make a pair o' canoes. I reckon it took all the loose buckskin in camp to git up them things, and the beads on 'em would fill a barrel. Bobby, you're rather an expensive lover—a ruther costive calf."

"Go right along with your abuse, Pegleg," said Bob; "I can stand it, seeing you're an old man."

Stonewall was induced to put on his moccasins and leggins, and when he had done so he walked out and through the camp with evident pride in his new possessions, though the Indians present looked upon him with envy.

Night finally settled over the valley, but the Indians kept coming and going nearly all night, bringing in the buffalo-hides and meat from the fields of slaughter.

At an early hour, however, the white hunters retired. Old Pegleg and Stonewall occupied a small lodge alongside a larger one in which were the amateurs. The latter soon fell asleep, but Pegleg and Stonewall could not dismiss from their minds the treachery of Bounding-Bear, and this, along with the confusion in the camp, kept them awake.

Lying close together they conversed in whispers. The hours wore wearily along to them, and Old Pegleg was getting out of patience with the noise in camp, when suddenly they discovered that the door to their lodge was being drawn slowly aside and that the moonbeams were stealing in upon them.

Without saying a word or moving a limb they turned their eyes toward the opening, and there, plainly outlined against the sky, they saw the gigantic frame of Bounding-Bear, stooping—a gleaming knife clutched in his hand!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HIDDEN GOLD CACHE.

STONEWALL BOB took in the situation in an instant. He saw that but a moment separated him from the murderous thrust of the Indian giant's knife—less time than he could possibly place himself on the defensive or draw a weapon.

Old Pegleg Sol seemed to have realized the situation equally as quick, for Stonewall Bob saw him throw up his wooden leg as if to check the advance of the assassin. At the same instant a dull, pistol-like report rung out, and the Boy Trojan saw a little tongue of fire spit out apparently from the old hunter's wooden limb, while, with a low gasp, the would-be assassin staggered back from the opening in the lodge and at once disappeared.

Grasping his revolver, Bob sprang nimbly to his feet.

"Sin and calamity! what's this mean?" he exclaimed.

"Hullo, pard!" said Old Sol, starting up as if from a sleep; "what's the matter with you? Been havin' bad dreams?"

"See here, old man, don't you know what's been going on? Didn't you see that form in the doorway, and hear that pistol-shot, and see the flash of the weapon?"

"Boy, you're in a bad condition—been havin' bad dreams, I swow you have—say, lay down here and keep still—you'll raise the hull camp. You're flighty, boy—you're not well."

"Pegleg Sol, you old calamitous wretch, you're telling me a straight, all-wool lie; you fired that shot and I know it. Say, now, didn't you?"

"Wal, Bobby, to be honest with you," the old fellow said in a whisper, "I jist kicked that big Ingin in the stomach with my game leg, and I guess it made him sick to the digestion, for I can shove that peg harder'n a buck antelope can butt."

"Pegleg, confound you, you're still lying to me, and I'm going to wrench that wooden leg off and thump you over the head with it, if you don't own up the truth. Say, haven't you got a masked battery concealed in that peg?"

"Te! he! he!" snickered the old man; "boy,

I'll own up, thar's one o' the slickest little shoot-in'-irons concealed in that wooden pegleg you ever see'd. The hull thing works like a clock, and now I'll tell you 'bout it. The ferule on the end is fastened with a hinge. A spring holds it in place and a spring flips it back when I want to shoot. If I can git my hand into my pocket, I can work the machine from thar. By techin' a little button the ferule flies back; another button and the weapon's discharged; and a third button and the cartridge is extracted and another inserted, ready for business. It war the invention and gift o' a wealthy gunsmith what I met at Fort Benton three years ago. The hull thing is no heavier'n a ordinary wooden club and I tell you she shoots like a derringer. It has served me several good turns lately. I swatted three—yes, four outlaws with it, the night I rescued Miss Maple Thurston. The last shot was fired right before her eyes, and you never see'd a gal so broke up—nighly as bad as the great White-Buffalo-Calf war 'while ago. Now that's the sacramental truth, Mr. Buffalo-Calf."

"You immense old fraud!" exclaimed Bob, "it would surprise anybody to see a wild-eyed, old, wobble-sided institution go 'round shootin' with his wooden leg."

"I reckon that Bouncin'-Bear war surprised," Pegleg went on, "and if I give him a square zip in the digestion it are likely he's sick 'bout this time. I s'pected to hear him yawp, but he only grunted and went away. Reckon he war tryin' to come a sly game on us—a still hunt."

"If the big scoundrel should die we might get into trouble, although I observe the report of your 'shooting-leg' hasn't raised any alarm yet—not even wakened our own boys sleeping within ten feet of us. Surely they ar'n't all dead."

"I'll bet that Ingin don't want Black Wolf to know anything 'bout his movements, and don't think we'll be disturbed any more by him—leastwise, not soon."

And in this the old hunter was right, for the night wore away without any further molestation; and in the morning Bounding-Bear was found dead on the outskirts of the camp, shot through the stomach, with a long scalping-knife driven deep into his heart evidently with his own hand.

The news of the giant's death soon spread through the camp and great excitement prevailed, but when it became known that he had committed suicide, though no one could explain the bullet-wound in the stomach, the general verdict was that he had taken his own life through mortification growing out of his defeat in the wrestle with White-Buffalo-Calf.

The matter being thus settled Stonewall and Old Pegleg felt easier, and after breakfast the whites held a consultation and finally decided to begin the search for the Hidden Cache.

To expedite matters and to allay any suspicions their movements might arouse, they took the chief into their confidence and promised him a share of the gold should they succeed in finding it.

To the surprise of the party the chief informed them that he could take them to the very spot where the massacre of Mercer's party occurred, for he himself had taken a leading part in the conflict. But he knew nothing of any hidden treasure nor had he ever heard of it before.

More hopeful now than ever of finding the cache, the spade brought along for the search was procured and the party started off headed by the chief.

But not over a mile from the camp the Indian suddenly stopped and said:

"Here is the place where the pale-faces were killed."

The whites gazed around them with a melancholy look. Not even a bleaching bone was to be seen.

"I guess you're right, chief," said Old Sol, "but I war thinkin' the massacre occurred a little east o' this."

"Black Wolf," said Frank Payne, to test the chief's memory, "do you remember how many of those pale-faces escaped?"

"Just one—he catch pony and escape," replied the chief.

"I guess Goven's story was a true one," said Payne, "but the gold was buried where they were last attacked. The note on the convict's data says it was buried half a mile east of where the massacre took place, or rather the massacre occurred west of the Gold Cache."

"That's rather indefinite, I find now," said Ben Clark, "but we have plenty time to make a thorough search."

So the party moved back about half a mile and then the search began in earnest. Every de-

pression in the ground, however slight, was thoroughly explored with the spade, and so eager and anxious were the amateurs that they regretted there were not half a dozen spades at command.

The hunt was kept up without success till noon when all went to camp for dinner, but as soon as the meal was over they hurried back and resumed the search. All that afternoon they labored diligently without success, and when darkness at length compelled them to quit for the day the plain around and about them looked like a deserted prairie-dog town.

With a feeling of disappointment they returned to camp resolved to continue the search on the morrow. They were satisfied beyond all doubt that the Hidden Cache was somewhere in the vicinity, and they were determined to find it if it took a month or more.

The next morning they started out quite early, and as they neared the scene of the previous day's labor Old Pegleg caught sight of a black stump of a bush protruding an inch or so above the grass.

"Look here, lads," the old plainsman said, "thar's the stub o' a bush that's been growin' here once."

"Yes, and a cottonwood, too," said Stonewall, stooping and chipping off some of the stump with his knife.

"Well, what can you make of that?" asked Frank Payne.

"Why, doesn't them notes say Mercer stuck a cottonwood stick in the ground 'bout a rod or two west of the cache?"

"Yes, but that's a stump six inches in diameter," replied Payne.

"I know it, but aren't it singular that a cottonwood bush should once be growin' here alone—out so far from the river? You know, don't you, that a cottonwood cutting will take root and grow like a willow? Now, s'pose the twig Captain Mercer stuck in the ground near his cache took root and grew to a good-sized bush, and then the prairie fire literally killed it, and the buffalo rubbed it down, leaving nothin' but this stump?"

"Well, in that case, which is possible, but hardly probable, the cache would be about two rods east of the stump," said Ben Clark, "and it won't take long to make the examination."

"By smoke! here's a slight depression," exclaimed Frank Payne, who was already on the search; "bring the spade here, Clark."

Ben took the spade to him, and grasping it impatiently, he sent the polished blade down into the earth. As he did so he sprang back as if from a serpent, exclaiming:

"Did you hear that, boys? The spade grated upon something hard. Listen!"

Again he sent the spade down into the earth, and this time all heard a dull, grating noise.

"Boys, we've found it!" declared the elated young man, as he worked the handle of the spade to and fro, and produced that grating sound again.

"Dig down, youngster, and be sure it's there," commanded Old Pegleg, "before you proclaim so stoutly."

Frank began to shovel out the dirt, and in a few moments the iron rim of a kettle was revealed to their gaze.

"Eureka!" shouted Payne, tossing the spade into the air and shouting with joy; "come, boys, and look upon the rim of the kettle—the pot that contains the treasure!"

The party all came up, and leaning over, gazed down at the kettle; then they started up with a yell, and for a few moments they acted like wild men. Stonewall Bob threw his hat into the air and shot a hole through it before it reached the ground. Old Pegleg danced a jig on his one foot. Young Lockwood stood on his head, and Ben Clark turned a handspring backward and forward, the last time driving his moccasined feet into Stonewall's breast with such force as to completely upset the young Trojan.

"There, now, that'll do!" Old Pegleg finally said, "don't bust your galls, but come and let's finish the work. To be sure we've found the gold, for I hear the eagles on the coins just now pipin' to each other with joy."

Stonewall Bob took up the spade and carefully dug the dirt from around the iron kettle, then he took hold of the vessel and lifted it from the hole and placed it on the ground.

"It's heavy as lead," the young Trojan said. The pot was full, the top being covered with solidly-packed earth, so that all beneath was invisible.

"Turn it up and empty it on the grass," said Ben Clark.

As Stonewall lifted the pot a breathless silence

fell upon the party and all fixed their eager eyes upon the vessel.

The young Trojan turned the kettle up. The contents slipped out in a solid block like a brick from the mold. Still nothing but dirt was visible. Frank Payne gave the lump a kick, and it crumbled to pieces, but not a gold coin was to be seen!

"The devil and calamity!" blurted Stonewall, "what does that mean? Where's the coins with Pegleg's piping eagles?"

"They must be in the other kettle—Goven said there was two of them buried," said Payne, somewhat excitedly.

Stonewall began digging, and soon struck another kettle, which he lifted from the cache. Like the other, it was full of something, the top being covered with earth.

"Boys," said the young Trojan, as he turned the kettle upside down, "this tells the tale."

The contents of the vessel slipped out like the other, in a solid block. Stonewall tore the block to pieces with his hands, and to the utter amazement of all, not a single gold coin was to be seen!

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF IT ALL.

LIKE dumb statues the hunters stood for several moments gazing at the empty kettles, the gaping cache, and at one and another, with a blank look of disappointment and surprise upon their faces.

"What's that, Bob?" asked Payne, pointing at the pile of earth.

"A bottle, by calamity!" exclaimed the Boy Trojan, picking a small glass vial out of the dirt; "and it's got a paper in it, too."

"Perhaps it will explain matters."

Stonewall quickly broke the vial with his knife and took up the paper and handed it to Frank Payne.

"Yes, here is some writing upon it," the young man said, unfolding the paper with nervous fingers.

"Read! read!" cried the friends.

Payne read as follows:

"TO WHOM THIS COMES GREETING:—Four weary pilgrims journeying up this valley chanced to find, by the merest accident, this cache in which there were many thousands of gold dollars; and not knowing whether the owner was alive, nor the whereabouts of his heirs, we will take possession of it and devote it to the benefit of some orphans we know of in great need. (Signed) THE ORPHANS."

As he concluded reading, Payne crushed the paper in his hand, and looking about him, said in disgust:

"Will somebody please kick me?"

"Heavens! that makes me tired," observed Lockwood.

"Let's all go soak our heads," added Ben Clark in disgust.

Stonewall Bob and Old Pegleg rolled on the ground in a fit of laughter.

"Well," Payne finally said, gazing abstractedly away across the plain, "we've been having a glorious lively time, anyhow, gold or no gold. Health is wealth, they say; therefore, I've been enriched coming West on this excursion. Gold corrupts the morals, and I'll venture the assertion that the canker has laid hold of them cussed 'Orphans' before this."

"All that galls me is the dangers we passed through getting here," observed young Renshaw.

"That's passed, and you're safe, and know more than you did, so what are you whining about?" retorted Lockwood.

"All your trouble comes," said Stonewall Bob, "of Ben Clark blabbing Goven's secret to his sweetheart in Arch Vandyke's hearing. Lovers shouldn't talk."

"Big White-Buffalo-Calf has bawled again," said Old Pegleg, "and if he'd apply his advice to himself, whar'd them canoes on his feet, and them blankets on his legs be?"

"Stonewall," said Payne, "you can give them two kettles and that spade to the chief, and this cache will do for a skunk's nest. Let us go back to camp and have a war-dance."

So saying, the entire party returned to camp disappointed but not at all despondent.

The party remained at the Indian camp over two weeks, and in that time they were not idle. They went out with the Indians on several buffalo-hunts, and upon each occasion distinguished themselves for the number of bisons they slew.

Finally Old Black Wolf gave a grand war-dance in honor of his guests, and if ever night was made hideous with a demoniac revel, it was upon that particular occasion. To the amusement of his friends, Stonewall Bob took part in the dance, and his towering form was a conspicu-

ous figure among the half-nude, grotesquely-painted Indians.

Ridiculous as the whole proceedings were to the white spectators, the chief and his fair daughter regarded them as eminently successful and it was with a smile of joy that Singing-Bird watched the form of the Boy Trojan as he went yelling and posturing and dancing around and around in one never-varying circle.

That the princess was in love with the young giant there was not a doubt in the minds of the whites, but there was some question as to whether her affections were fully reciprocated by the young plainsman.

At length the time for departure home came, and it was with a feeling of no little regret that the hunters were forced to quit the Indian camp; and no one seemed to take their departure more to heart than did Singing-Bird.

Before parting, the princess and Stonewall held a private talk, and what passed between them—what promises were made and wishes expressed will never be known, for Stonewall was too gallant and honorable to trifle with the affections of the simple-hearted girl, or to say aught of her not of the greatest respect.

Old Pegleg Sol consented to accompany his friends to the settlement—the home of the Thurs-ton and Ben Clark, and no sooner were they out of sight and hearing of the Indian camp than Stonewall Bob opened on the old borderman and gave him "dead away" to the party as to the "masked battery" he carried concealed in his wooden leg; he also revealed the mystery connected with the death of the Indian, Bounding-Bear, and not until then did Stonewall's friends know how near he came to death that night in the Indian camp.

At noon of the first day of their homeward journey the party halted in the valley by the Sentinel, that historical rock where the Boy Trojan first met Mabel Thurston on that ever-to-be remembered night of the great buffalo stampede. The polished bones of half a dozen bisons were all that remained of that whirlpool of death that rolled and surged around the rock, excepting some dark stains on the stone where the life-blood of Zadok, the hunter, had been spilled.

A feeling of the deepest sorrow filled the breast of Mabel Thurston as she stood by the Sentinel.

The maiden again told the story of the old man's tragic death, and wept bitterly.

"Boys," said Stonewall, "let us dedicate this rock to the memory of Zadok, the hunter, and carve his name upon it, that ages to come may look upon it."

"Oh, do! do!" cried Mabel, with a feeling of veneration for the memory of the man who had saved her and her father's life at the cost of his own.

With the blade of a hatchet for a chisel, Stonewall Bob cut the name, "ZADOK," in large, deep letters upon the stone. It required several hours to do it, but all felt that the time was well spent, and when they mounted and moved on, it was with a feeling of relief over having paid a last tribute to a dead hero.

On the fourth day of their journey the party reached the settlement, where all were received with the wildest demonstrations.

And thus ended the search for the Hidden Gold Cache, and while it had been barren of results so far as treasure was concerned, every one of the party was ready to vote it a grand success so far as perils, adventures and thrilling sport went. The amateurs were proud of their lively experience on the Great Range, yet they had no desire to pass through the same again.

And while the amateurs were at Humboldt they had the pleasure of attending the wedding of Ben Clark and Mabel Thurston, an affair which the notorious Archibald Vandyke had hoped to prevent by the abduction of the maiden, assisted by the outlaws to whom Vandyke had furnished the information concerning Mercer's buried treasure.

Finally the time came for the amateurs to take their departure for their Eastern home, and it was then that their separation from their friends—from Stonewall Bob and jolly Old Pegleg—was made with feelings of the deepest regret, which would have been all the deeper, had arrangements not been made for another grand hunt one year from that time, when their acquaintance and friendship could of course be renewed.

During the fall Old Pegleg Sol returned to his favorite haunts away up on the upper Missouri, and there Stonewall Bob promised to take the amateurs when they again came West in quest of sport and adventure.

THE END.

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